JAN.
15¢

EXCITING WESTERN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

ANC

Strangers IN EL SEGUNDO

A Tombstone & Speedy Novel

By W. C. TUTTLE

POWDER ON THE PECOS

An Action Novelet

By HAL WHITE

Come on in... it's warm inside

the new fully automatic Motorola CAR HEATER

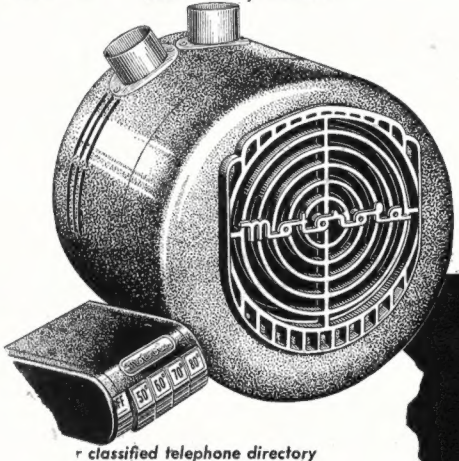
POSITIVE HEAT SELECTOR, THERMOSTAT CONTROLLED
Fast, constant heat. Heats in a minute or less! Maintains pre-selected heat constantly.

ALL THE HEAT YOU WANT
So powerful it produces sufficient heat to keep an average size room comfortably WARM.

HEATS WHEN THE ENGINE IS OFF
Operates independently of engine and fuel pump. Does not affect idling of engine.

EASY TO INSTALL IN ALL CARS
Fits every make and model car—even those with automatic transmission.

TWO MODELS, FOR COWL-MOUNT AND UNDERSEAT INSTALLATION
Both models engineered for thorough air circulation. Both have efficient defroster-blower system.



r classified telephone directory
est Motorola Radio dealer.

INC. • CHICAGO 51, ILL.

BY THE MAKERS OF THE FAMOUS MOTOROLA CAR RADIOS

Motorola GASOLINE CAR HEATER

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period in your life? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of $3,000 to $10,000?

An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing!*

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

Why not, like so many before you, investigate LaSalle's modern Problem Method of training for an accountancy position?

Just suppose you were permitted to work in a large accounting house under the personal supervision of an expert accountant. Suppose, with his aid, you studied accounting principles and solved problems day by day—easy ones at first—then the more difficult ones. If you could do this—and if you could turn to him for advice as the problems became complex—soon you'd master them all.

That's the training you follow in principle under the LaSalle Problem Method.

You cover accountancy from the basic Principles right up through Accountancy Systems and Income Tax Procedure. Then you add C. P. A. Training and prepare for the C. P. A. examinations.

As you go along, you absorb the principles of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Statistical Control, Organization, Management and Finance.

Your progress is as speedy as you care to make it—depending on your own eagerness to learn and the time you spend in study.

Will recognition come? The only answer, as you know, is that success *does* come to the man who is really *trained.* It's possible your employers will notice your improvement in a very few weeks or months. Indeed, many LaSalle graduates have paid for their training—with increased earnings—before they have completed it! For accountants, who are trained in organization and management, are the executives of the future.

Write For This Free Book

For your own good, don't put off investigation of *all* the facts. Write for our free 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays." It'll prove that accountancy offers brilliant futures to those who aren't afraid of serious home study. Send us the coupon *now.*

Over 2300 Certified Public Accountants among LaSalle alumni

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY

A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

417 South Dearborn Street, Dept. 1329-H Chicago 5, Illinois

I want to be an accountant. Send me, without cost or obligation, the 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays," and full information about your accountancy training program.

Name.....

Address..... *City*.....

Position..... *Age*.....

EXCITING WESTERN

VOL. 14, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JANUARY, 1948

STRANGERS IN EL SEGUNDO

By W. C. TUTTLE

Nobody knew what Tombstone and Speedy wanted in town, but after a murder, a stage hold-up, and some ventures into occult science, their secret was out! A rollicking complete novel 13

POWDER ON THE PECOS (Novelet) . . . . . Hal White 38
Newcomer Ridge Simpson meets trouble head-on when he tangles with the tough rustlers of Yellow Rock!

UNDERCOVER SANTA CLAUS . . . . . Johnston McCulley 53
On his chosen mission, Joe Withers risks hanging.

MAN-BAIT FOR A GUN TRAP (Novelet) . . . . . T. W. Ford 62
To aid a girl, Clem Riddle rides into the outlaw town of Priest's Gulch—where evil danger lurks!

TANGLE FOOT . . . . . Chuck Martin 79
Outlaw lead sharpened Deputy Jim Bowen's gun-aim.

THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT . . . . . Chuck Stanley 87
The old-timer talks about wagons and place names.

POWERFUL HOMBRE . . . . . Tex Mumford 91
Big Lance Alcott thinks fast when he's on a spot.

REMEMBER THE KNIFE . . . . . Leo Charles 97
Knife-throwing was just a stunt to Benton, until—

TRAIL BLAZERS . . . . . Captain Ranger 6
A meaty department devoted to the great outdoors.

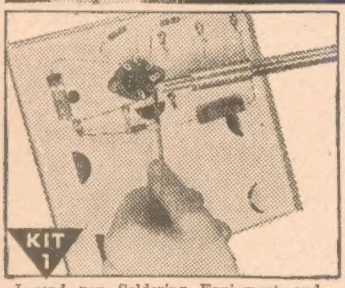
EXCITING WESTERN published every other month and copyright, 1947, by Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues), $1.80; single copies, $.15. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Entered as second class matter March 20, 1945, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

Our companion magazines: Triple Western, Triple Detective, The Phantom Detective, Thrilling Detective, Popular Detective, Detective Mystery Novel, Thrilling Love, Thrilling Ranch Stories, Thrilling Western, Thrilling Sports, Thrilling Wonder Stories, West, Sky Fighters, G-Men Detective, Popular Sports Magazine, Popular Love, Popular Western, Everyday Astrology, Texas Rangers, Range Riders Western, Startling Stories, Detective Novel Magazine, Masked Rider Western, Rio Kid Western, Exciting Love, Thrilling Football, Black Book Detective, Exciting Sports, Popular Football, Rodeo Romances, Mystery Book Magazine and Giant Western.

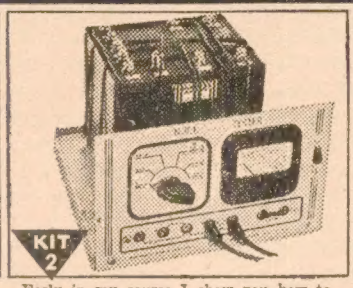
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

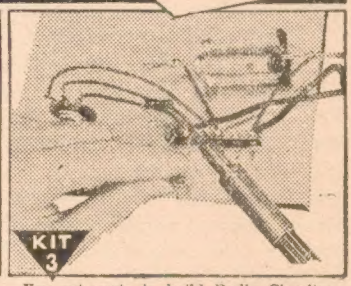
I Send You Big Kits of Radio Parts



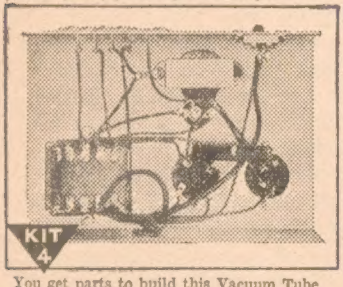
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



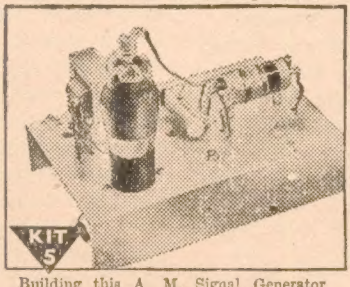
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



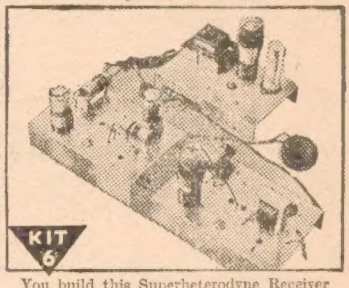
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

KNOW RADIO—*Win Success*

I Will Train You at Home—SAMPLE LESSON FREE

APPROVED for training under G.I. BILL

Do you want a good-pay job in the fast-growing Radio Industry—or your own Radio Shop? Mail the Coupon for a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in RADIO—Television, Electronics," both FREE. See how I will train you at home—how you get practical Radio experience building, testing Radio circuits with BIG KITS OF PARTS I send!

Many Beginners Soon Make Extra Money in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending EXTRA MONEY manuals that show how to make EXTRA money fixing neighbor's Radios in spare time while still learning! It's probably easier to get started now than ever before, because the Radio Repair Business is booming. Trained Radio Technicians also find profitable opportunities in Police, Aviation, Marine Radio, Broadcasting, Radio Manufacturing, Public Address work. Think of even *greater* opportunities as Television, FM, and Electronic devices become available to the public! Send for FREE books now!

Find Out What NRI Can Do For You

Mail Coupon for Sample Lesson and my FREE 64-page book. Read the details about my Course; letters from men I trained; see how quickly, easily you can get started. No obligation! Just MAIL COUPON NOW in envelope or paste on penny postal. **J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8A09, National Radio Institute,** *Pioneer Home Study Radio School,* **Washington 9, D. C.**

My training includes TELEVISION • ELECTRONICS • F M

VETERANS

You can get this training right in your own home under G. I. Bill. Mail coupon for full details.

Good for Both—FREE

Mr. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8A09, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me FREE, your sample lesson and 64-page book. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name.....Age.....

Address.....

City.....Zone....State.....

A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER

THERE are more ways than one of skinning a cat—or making a mine property out in the West pay dividends. Of course if you've got paying ore, good transportation and a handy market for the product, the thing is simple. You've got a mine.

If you've had the luck to locate yourself a real paystreak along some gold-bearing placer stream, you can also go ahead. Dig out the gravel right down to bedrock, wash it through a rocker or set of sluice boxes to recover the flakes and colors of gold and there you are. What more could an outdoor-hankerin', western-minded hombre want?

It's not the beans and bacon, or better propositions we're going to talk about right now. No sir. They'll take care of themselves. But what about the busts, the duds that won't come out even, despite a showing of fancy, but unfortunately lean ore? Give them up? Not necessarily.

The Guest Mine

You might be able to do what at least one person we know about did in Colorado under the circumstances. She's a woman at that, and despite her plus or minus qualifications as a miner, a mighty resourceful one. She thought of tourists. Tourists like to see the sights when they visit the West. Maybe, reasoned this smart lady, they'd like to look inside a real mine—for a modest fee—and be given a sample of real ore free to take back home with them as a souvenir.

The novel idea clicked. Clicked big enough to enable the woman to make a comfortable living out of her enterprise—and go to Florida winters on the proceeds.

Where is this guest mine? It's a lead mine, by the way, and lies up in the high mountains near Empire west of Denver in the once bonanza rich mining country around Idaho Springs, Georgetown and Silver Plume. And Empire, a little mining town of perhaps a hundred persons, is on a main, paved highway used by countless tourists in their summer treks by car across the West.

Anyhow as we heard the story Mrs. Mary C. Dolphin, who operates the take-a-look-and-have-a-sample mine, is a widow who moved out to Colorado about ten years ago for her health. In time she dabbled in mine properties, as who doesn't who lives in that rich mining State, and became the owner of a full-fledged lead mine that had everything but lead in paying quantities.

Things Looked Bad, But—

Naturally she couldn't work the mine herself. Leasers who tried to work it on shares couldn't break even. It looked for a time as if Mrs. Dolphin was stuck, as if she would have to go back East. But she liked the West, and she liked the mine with its play of crystals and fragments of lead ore clinging to the walls and ceiling of the long cavernous tunnels inside the mine.

A bust as a mine or not, it was a fascinating place to visit. Not to mining men who were only interested in the ore content and gave the pretty rock a cold, unfeeling eye. But to a stranger to the mining country, such as she herself was then, it was something new and novel.

Then she got her bright idea, hung up a sign where tourists along the highway could see it—and waited for customers. No doubt some of the oldtimers were surprised when tourists actually began to show up. Whole carfuls from all over the country, but mostly from the East and Midwest.

Mrs. Dolphin's shrewd idea had launched her into a new twist in mining business. She's still in it.

Another fellow with a similar idea of panning gold out of the tourist trade was a miner by the name of Johnny Kolman. Also in Colorado, Kolman, a practical miner, at the time operated a group of gold mines under his personal supervision in the formerly fabulously rich Cripple Creek gold region in the barren hills overshadowed by the cone of Mt. Pisgah in the country back of Colorado Springs about 70 miles south of Denver.

Cripple Creek was a helldorado hummer in its day, a wild gold camp that has pro-

(Continued on page 8)

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY

who never thought they could!

Thrilled by Playing

I've had my lessons just a week. I think your course is super. I was more thrilled than words can express when I found I could actually play America, The Merry Widow Waltz and the others.
*J. T., Mancelona, Mich.

Wouldn't Take $1000 for Course

The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course. *S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.

Shares Course With Sister

The teaching is so interesting and the pieces so beautiful I couldn't ask for anything better, I recommend your course highly. My sister shares it with me and feels the same way.
*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.

Finding New Joy

I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before, for I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.
*C. S. Lucien, Okla.

Plays After 2 Months

I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.
*E. T., Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

You, too, can play any instrument By this EASY A-B-C Method

YOU think it's difficult to learn music? That's what thousands of others have thought! Just like you, they long to play some instrument — the piano, violin, guitar, saxophone or other favorites. But they denied themselves the pleasure —because they thought it took months and years of tedious study to learn.

Learn in Spare Time at Home

And then they made an amazing discovery! They learned about a wonderful way to learn music at home—without a private teacher—without tedious study—and in a surprisingly short time. They wrote to the U. S. School of Music for the facts about this remarkable short-cut method. And the facts opened their eyes! They were amazed to find how easy it was to learn.

The result? Over 850,000 men and women have studied music at home this simple, A-B-C way. Now, all over the world, enthusiastic music-lovers are enjoying the thrilling satisfaction of creating their own music. They have found the key to good times, popularity and profit.

Costs only few cents a Day

And that's what you can do, right now. Get the proof that you, too, can learn to play your favorite instrument — quickly, easily, in spare time at home for only a few cents a day. Never mind if you have no musical knowledge or talent. Just read the fascinating booklet and Print and Picture sample that explain all about the U. S. School method. (Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit.) Tear out the coupon now, before you turn the page. U. S. School of Music, 2941 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y. (50th year)

FREE!

Print and Picture Sample

NOTICE

Please don't confuse our method with any systems claiming to teach "without music" or "by ear". We teach you easily and quickly to play real music, any music, by standard notes . . . not by any trick or number system.

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC,
2941 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y.

I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument checked below. Please send me your free illustrated booklet "How to Learn Music at Home," and your free Print and Picture Sample.

Piano	Saxophone	Clarinet	Practical Finger Control
Guitar	Trumpet, Cornet	Trombone	
Hawaiian Guitar	Reed Organ	Flute	Piccolo
Violin	Tenor Banjo	Modern Elementary Harmony	Mandolin
Piano Accordion	Ukulele		

Have you Instrument?

Name..... (Please print)

Address.....

City..... State.....

NOTE: If you are under 16 years of age, parent must sign coupon.

SAVE 2c — STICK COUPON ON PENNY POSTCARD

CUT DOWN NICOTINE!
MEDICO
FILTERED
SMOKING
MAKE THE 1-PACK TEST
START WITH A FRESH FILTER
Smoke just one pack of cigarettes—then look at the filter.
YOUR EYES CAN SEE THAT
Medico-filtered smoking cuts down nicotine and irritating tars. For full benefits, replace filter when discolored. Makes your favorite cigarette taste better.
HOLDER
$1
with box of ten filters
Only these patented filters have the 66 baffles that whirl the smoke cleaner and cooler into your mouth. For pipes, cigarette and cigar holders.
S. M. FRANK & CO., INC., NEW YORK 22

LAW...

STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before. **More Ability: More Prestige: More Money** We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW.
LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 1329-L Chicago 5, Ill.

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. Secure "Patent Guide" together with "Record of Invention" form—without obligation.
CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
88-A District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 6)

duced some $400,000,000 in yellow metal. It has slowed down a lot since its turbulent beginning in the 1890s—but it is still an active Colorado gold mining center.

Quite aside from the millions made in the gold mines by men like W. S. Stratton, Spencer Penrose and others, Cripple Creek saw for a time many who later became celebrities in their own fields. William Harrison Dempsey—Jack Dempsey that is—once worked as a mucker in Cripple Creek's gold mines. Jack Johnson, the famed Negro world heavyweight champion, was a bouncer for a while in a Cripple Creek saloon. And it is said that Tex Guinan started her career as an entertainer at the famed mine camp.

Though modern Cripple Creek is just a skeleton of its former self, it is a mining town well worth a visit by anyone who really wants to see the old West as it is, and was. Johnny Kolman thought so too. So he organized what he called "The Gold Empire Mine Trip," and his customers got a real look-see deep into the drifts and stopes of an actual working gold mine—one of the properties under his own supervision.

In fact he advertised, "The 'cage' that takes you down into the gold mine and brings you out again is just as safe as the 'elevator' in a city office building," in case Eastern tourists were apprehensive about allowing themselves to be dropped into the bowels of the earth in a mine skip.

A Free Ore Sample

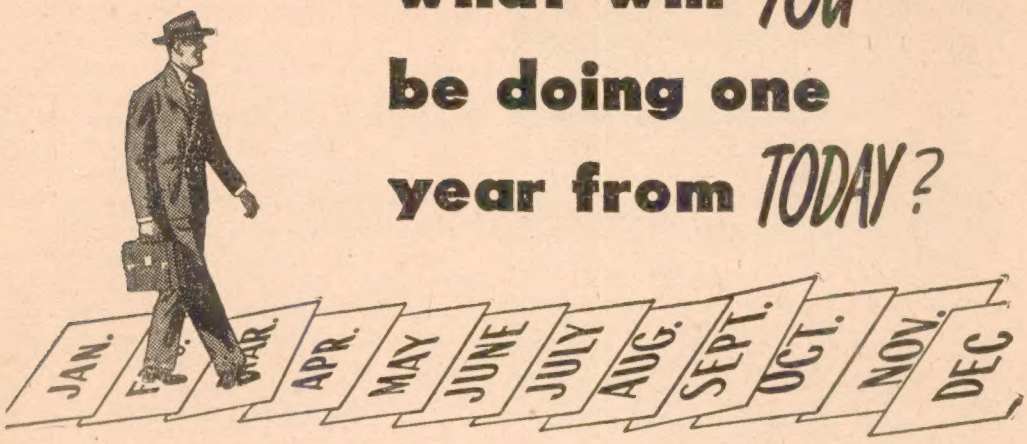
As an added fillip Kolman also offered his visitors a free ore sample to take home, and a chance to register in a special ledger as a Cripple Creek gold miner.

Though Cripple Creek is on a paved highway, Colorado State Route 67, it does not lie on any of the main east-west transcontinental highways, or the main north-south artery from Denver down to Colorado Springs and Pueblo.

To reach it you have to make a 45-mile side trip from Colorado Springs via Routes 24 and 67, or take 122, a gravelled road over the mountains direct from the latter city. It can also be reached by car from Route 50 at Canon City.

(Continued on page 10)

what will YOU be doing one year from TODAY?



YOU'RE too smart to stay in the same old job rut! You know that you have one life — that's all. So you've thought about *doing* something that would advance you in your work, increase your income.

The time to get started is *now*. And you can take the first step toward Personal Success this very minute! Just look over the coupon below and mark the I. C. S. Course in your field of interest. Then mail it — *today!*

We'll send you complete information on the International Correspondence Schools, and how they can give you the training you need to get ahead faster. Cost is low, texts are easy to understand, and every student gets *personal* service. The time to "take steps" is RIGHT NOW!

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3969-K, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ French
- ☐ Good English
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Power House Electric
- ☐ Ship Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician
- ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines
- ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Forging
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake
- ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric
- ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

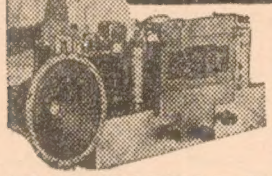
Name_____ Home Address _____

City_____ State_____

Age_____ Present Position_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces.
Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

GET INTO RADIO TELEVISION ELECTRONICS NOW!



INTERESTING JOBS — GOOD PAY—EARN WHILE YOU LEARN—A BUSINESS OF YOUR OWN, are just a few of the opportunities awaiting you as a Trained National Radio, Television and Electronic Expert. Broadcasting, Radio Service, and other specialized phases are constantly demanding more and more trained men. Get all the facts about this GREAT FIELD. ACT AT ONCE!

SHOP METHOD HOME TRAINING
By a Real Established Resident Trade School
With Classrooms, FM Studios, Shops and Laboratories

gives you the knowledge, skill, and experience that assure definite progress — step-by-step for a brighter, more prosperous future. You Learn by Doing. Build a standard LONG DISTANCE SUPERHETERODYNE RECEIVER as shown above, an audio oscillator, a signal generator (low powered Radio transmitter) and many other units and experiments with equipment furnished you in your home. National Graduates everywhere have qualified, through spare time study for well-paying jobs, success and security in Radio. It is a field with a proved future. Find out what this industry offers National Trained Service Engineers, Operators and Technicians. Take the first step to greater success NOW by sending coupon below—TODAY! G.I. APPROVED

FREE LESSON

NATIONAL SCHOOLS
LOS ANGELES 37, CALIFORNIA

MAIL COUPON

National Schools, Dept. TG-1
4000 S. Figueroa Los Angeles 37, Calif.

Mail me sample lesson and book FREE. Paste on a post card

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....ZONE.....STATE.....

☐ Check here if Veteran of World War II

Get into Good Paying
AUTO BODY and FENDER WORK

BIG DEMAND in Auto Body and Fender work. Start training now in your spare time at home for good pay work. Practical shop experience included. U.E.I. Training covers metal work, welding, painting, etc. Placement service—or we will show you how to start your own shop. Behind U.E.I. TRAINING is a large national organization founded 1927. Write today for FREE FACTS—No obligation.

Approved for Training under G.I. Bill

AUTO-CRAFTS DIVISION • UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
2523 Sheffield Avenue, Dept. X-7AF, Chicago 14, Illinois

High School Course
at Home Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H-158, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

Learn to MOUNT BIRDS
Tan SKINS, make up FURS

Be a Taxidermist. *Double your hunting fun.* We teach you at Home, Mount Birds, Animals, Fish, Heads, common specimens. Fun and profits. Decorate home and den MAKE MONEY. Mount game, tan for others. Big profits in spare time. WRITE TODAY. 100 game pictures in Hunters, get your copy. It's FREE BOOK Now Free. Send post card. State your AGE.

FREE BOOK

NORTHWESTERN SCHOOL OF TAXIDERMY
Dept. 4174 Omaha, Nebraska

TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 8)

This is mentioned because though the basic interest is there, auto tourists are a strange breed. They'll stop and take a gander at almost any unusual attraction that is directly on their route of travel. But for many of them it would take a team of elephants to pull them off the main highway even to see Niagara Falls flow uphill.

For another thing the number of customers such a side excursion can lure to the ticket office is always in direct proportion to the total number of people actually passing by.

On the Main Road

Personally if we were planning on trying to pick up an old worn out mine and use it as a tourist attraction, we would make every effort to get it right on, or as close as possible to, a main through auto route across the West. Even if it was in a mining district neither as rich nor as famous as one further back on a side road detour.

There are many such camps and mining districts throughout both the West and the Southwest. For instance, east of Sacramento in California both main roads up toward Lake Tahoe and down into Reno and Ormsby, Nevada, respectively, Routes 40 and 50, go directly through some historically rich California Mother Lode mining country. Further south Route 6 out of Los Angeles passes through the desert mining town of Mojave, and a lot of desert mining country.

The famous Grants Pass gold mining town, and gold districts in Oregon lie on another main artery of auto travel, Route 99. In Arizona, Tombstone, the active copper centers of Bisbee, Globe, Miami and Superior are all situated on modern, well-travelled and much favored tourist auto routes to and through the Southwest. Routes 40, 50, 6, 95 and 93 in Nevada also all pass through fascinating mining towns and mining districts.

The first thing to do would be to pick your general location, remembering that the more southern through roads in the Southwest have a longer season, and more year around tourist travel than the northern routes that must perforce cross the Rockies and other mountain ranges by high mountain passes. Then having decided that much, the next step would be to try to locate an old aban-

(Continued on page 109)

LEARN EITHER ELECTRICITY OR RADIO in Just a few Short Weeks!

Get Training *NOW* in the GREAT SHOPS of COYNE

YOUR CHOICE OF 2 BIG FIELDS!

Why spend years learning Electricity or Radio? Come to the Great Shops of COYNE in Chicago—the Electrical and Radio Center of the World. Whether you've had some experience, or none at all, COYNE prepares you for good jobs in a few short weeks. Get the facts! Mail coupon today.

NOT "HOME-STUDY" COURSES!

All Coyne training is given here in our own big shops. We do not teach by mail. You work on actual full-size equipment, just like you'll use on the job. Almost before you realize it, you're a Coyne Graduate—ready for big opportunities!

VETERANS! Coyne is authorized to accept veterans for G.I. training. Coupon brings bulletin.

NON-VETERANS who are short of cash can finance their tuition and pay in easy monthly payments after graduation.

Famous for Nearly 50 Years

B. W. COOKE, President

COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL

500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 18-84K, Chicago 12, Ill.

FREE BOOK on RADIO or ELECTRICITY

B. W. Cooke

Whether you prefer Radio or Electricity, send now for big new FREE BOOK on the field of your choice. Dozens of pictures, facts about Coyne Training. No obligation. No salesman will call. Rush coupon now!

MAIL NOW

B. W. COOKE, President
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 18-84K, Chicago 12, Ill.

Send me your BIG FREE BOOK for the Course checked below, and your special plans to help me. This does not obligate me and no salesman will call.

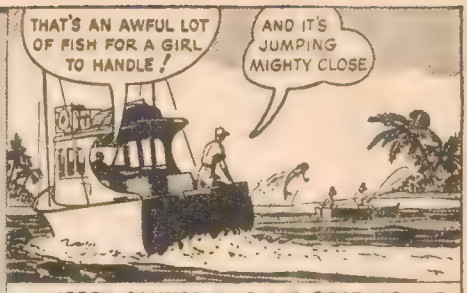
☐ ELECTRICITY ☐ RADIO

NAME.....

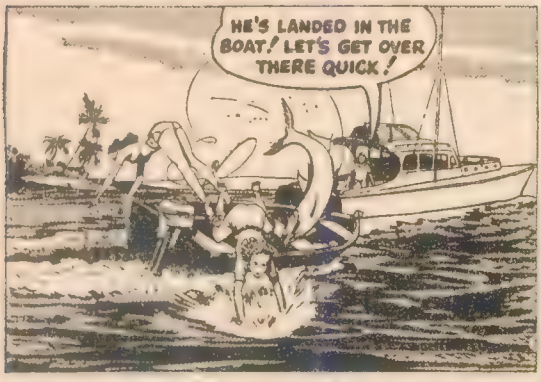
ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN • • •



PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"
WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA

SAY, THIS BLADE'S A HONEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE
LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES THEY'RE REALLY KEEN

MEN, THIN GILLETTES HAND OUT SHAVES THAT ARE CLEAN, COMFORTABLE AND GOOD-LOOKING. AMONG ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES, THEY'RE THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING. THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, TOO. THAT MEANS YOU ARE PROTECTED AGAINST SCRAPING AND IRRITATION. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette BLADES
4 for 10¢

"You boys have been hurt!" exclaimed Aunt Ida

STRANGERS IN EL SEGUNDO

By W. C. TUTTLE

Nobody knew what the rollicking range detectives were doing in town, but after a murder, a stage holdup, and some ventures into occult science, the secret was out!

CHAPTER I

Terminated

"TOMBSTONE" Jones and "Speedy" Smith sat together on the top pole of the feed corral at El Segundo. A six-horse team and freight wagon stirred up a cloud of dust which engulfed the two cowpokes for a few moments.

Tombstone was at least seven feet tall, counting his sombrero and high-heel boots, and the scales barely wavered at a hundred and forty. He had a long, thin face, high cheekbones, sad eyes, and unruly hair.

Speedy Smith was rather a runt, but of the same specifications. Five feet, seven inches, weight in the wet season, one hundred. He nurtured a mustache.

TOMBSTONE JONES

At least, it had hair on it. Speedy could also read and write, which Tombstone could not. No man, with normal vision, would ever spot them as Cattle Association detectives.

Speedy had a letter in his left hand. They knew its contents by heart, but Tombstone wanted it read again.

"Mebbe there's a loop-hole, Speedy," he said quietly.

Speedy spat disgustedly, but opened the letter.

"It says," he began, " 'Not havin' heard from yuh for five weeks, except for a rather insultin' telegram—' "

"There yuh are—right there!" exclaimed Tombstone. "That's a point!"

"Point of what?" asked Speedy wearily.

"It wasn't insultin'."

"Mebbe it was to him. Anyway, it says, '—rather insultin' telegram, and as circumstances oblige me to curtail expenditures, it is my duty to notify you that yore connections with the Association are hereby terminated. Enclosed yuh will find two checks, coverin' yore final salaries and expenses. Thankin' yuh for yore efforts in our behalf, I beg to remain, very truly yores, Jim Keaton, Secretary. P.S. Yuh're fired!' "

"Hm-m-m-m," muttered Tombstone. "He don't leave nothin' to yore imagination. Fired, eh? Yeah, I sabe that, but what's the upper part of the letter all about? We're terminated, are we?"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Speedy. "In Arrowhead City I wrote a long letter to Jim Keaton, tellin' him all our troubles. Yuh said yuh'd post that letter, and I . . . Tombstone Jones, you took that letter. Don't look so innocent! You know blamed well—"

"Oh, m'gosh!" breathed Tombstone.

"Yeah, I'd say so. What'd yuh do with that letter?"

"I 'member," sighed Tombstone. "I tore m' overalls, and they was all muddy. I put that letter in m' hip-pocket—yessir, I did. Well, I went to the store and bought me a new pair, and I asked the man to burn up m' old ones in his stove. He done it, too."

"And my letter was in yore overall pocket! That cost us our good jobs."

"Well," sighed Tombstone resignedly, "we've still got our health."

"Yeah, and we're goin' to need it. Forty a month punchin' cows!"

"Uh-huh. And still, it'll be a relief—not chasin' criminals, and gettin' shot at."

"And," added Speedy, "we'll get forty a month—and no expense money."

"I don't reckon I'll be able to hold m' head up for a while."

"Yuh might wear some sort of a brace. Let's go over and meet the sheriff. Mebbe he knows where we can land jobs."

"That's a gruesome idea, Speedy. Go easy, will yuh? We've still got them checks. After all, we don't want t' jump right into somethin' that we'd be sorry about later. I believe we should pick and choose—anyway, until we find we've busted our pick."

TOMBSTONE and Speedy had been in El Segundo only two days. After their job was finished in War Dance Valley, they had decided to take a long vacation. Tombstone discovered a roulette wheel, where the Double O came up three spins in a row, and they vacationed in style, not realizing that Jim Keaton, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, had not received Speedy's letter.

A man was sitting at the sheriff's desk, boots on the desk-top, a sombrero pulled over his face.

"No hurry about answerin'," Tombstone said, "but are you the sheriff?"

"No-o-o," replied the voice in muffled tones.

"He's talkin' through his hat," Speedy said.

Slowly the man removed the hat and looked at them. He was a lean-faced, round-eyed person, with a crooked nose. After looking them over carefully he said:

"I am Morton Chesterfield Hayes."

"Imagine that!" gasped Tombstone. "After bein' all around the world, we drop into a little place like this, and find *him.*"

"You—uh—what? You was lookin' for me?"

"No," replied Tombstone, "but you're the first Morton Chesterfield Hayes we ever seen. How does it feel?"

"How does what feel?"

"Havin' a name like that? Mine's Jones and he's Smith."

Morton Chesterfield's Adam's-apple bobbed several times and he slowly took his feet off the desk.

"You two don't happen to herd sheep, do yuh?" he asked soberly.

"Shepherds don't just happen—they're born," said Speedy.

"Most everybody was born at one time or another. Huh? Did yuh say yore name's Jones?"

"Yessir. Born amid holy wedlock to the Abijah Clee-elum Joneses, seventh son of a seventh son. I am somewhat of a prophet."

"I didn't ask yuh for a birth certificate," growled the deputy sheriff. "Here's a telegram for Tombstone Jones, care of this here office. They prob'ly thought yuh would be in jail."

Speedy took the telegram—for obvious reasons. It was from Jim Keaton, and read:

Ignore Letter. See Banker El Segundo. Tell Him I Sent You.

"Tombstone," said Speedy soberly, "yuh've jist made another fortune in oil."

Tombstone stared at Speedy in amazement, but Speedy was not going to elaborate.

He started for the doorway, with Tombstone behind him.

"What kinda oil?" asked Morton Chesterfield Hayes.

"Omega, I think," replied Speedy.

Outside the office, Speedy read the telegram to Tombstone.

"Ignore letter, huh?" said Tombstone. "Why?"

"This means we ain't fired."

SPEEDY SMITH

"Ain't, huh? What about the oil fortune?"

"Sometimes, I look at you and wonder, Tombstone. I didn't want to tell that deputy what was in that telegram, so I said yuh'd made a fortune in oil. I had to say somethin'. He'd think it was funny, me readin' yore telegram, and not sayin' anythin'."

"That's right. What's Omega?"

"Burn that up with yore next pair of old overalls. C'mon, we're goin' to talk business with the banker. Mebbe he needs us bad."

"I'd shore like to work in a bank. I wonder what kinda jobs he's got for us. I'd like to wear a pencil behind m' ear."

"Yuh could wear a shotgun behind yours. C'mon."

The Bank of El Segundo was not pretentious, but did a goodly amount of business. There was not a customer in the bank, as the two cowpokes walked in. A woman was operating an adding machine, the banker busy at a desk. He got up and came over to them.

Speedy said quietly:

"Yuh asked the Cattle Association to send yuh a couple detectives, didn't yuh?"

The man looked them over thoughtfully, his eyes puzzled at the query.

"We're here," added Tombstone, "and rarin' to go."

"I see. You are from the Cattle Association—and I sent for you."

"That's right."

"Detectives, eh? You two are detectives?"

"If it wasn't for us," declared Tombstone, "the Association would shortly be in the sere and yaller leaf."

The banker smiled slowly. "I imagine it would," he said. "Would you boys give me a few days to figure out just why I sent for you?"

"Shore," agreed Speedy. "We're bein' paid to wait."

"Good! Drop in again in a few days. Thank you for coming."

BOTH walked out and went down the street.

"There's a roulette wheel at the El Rey Saloon, Speedy," Tombstone said, "and we've still got them checks. The law of averages ort to—"

"The law of averages can wait," said Speedy. "We're buyin' new shirts and socks. If we're goin' to work for a bank, we'll dress the part. And we could use boots, and also some shells for a forty-five."

"Do yuh know," mused Tombstone thoughtfully, "I ain't smart. I'm awful slow to take holt of anythin', but if that feller sent for us what's he got to take three, four days, tryin' to figger out why he sent for us?"

Speedy shoved his hands deeply into his overalls pockets and looked admiringly at his lanky partner.

"With enough practice," he declared, "yuh could be almost a mental defective. Tombstone, yuh said somethin'."

"Did I?" Tombstone grinned. "If we're buyin' shirts, I'll take me a red one."

A few minutes after Tombstone and Speedy left the bank, Eph Gardner, the big, slab-sided sheriff, wandered into the institution.

The banker spoke to him, and the sheriff said, "Hyah, Frank."

"Just let me ask you something, Sheriff."

"Go ahead. What's eatin' yuh?"

"Those two strangers—the tall one and the short one."

"Oh, them! What do you want to say about 'em, Frank?"

"A while ago," said Frank Graves, "they came in here and quietly informed me that I had asked the Cattlemen's Association to send me a couple of detectives. They had been sent here at *my* request. I didn't want to argue with them, so I asked for a few days' time, in order to find out just why I sent for them."

The sheriff grinned slowly. "They're crazy as loons," he declared. "Mort told me they came to the office a while ago, and the tall one claimed to be the seventh son of a seventh son. A telegram to them, sent in care of my office, was handed to them by Mort. The short one read it, and said, 'Yuh've just made another fortune in oil!' Imagine that! They're crazy."

"I believe they are, Ed. Better keep an eye on them."

"Yeah, I'll do it. I'll have Mort kinda hang around with 'em."

The sheriff went almost to the door, but turned.

"What kind of oil is Omega, Frank?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," replied Frank Graves, "but I think it is the kind you put on yourself and rub it in, Eph. That's what I think, anyway."

"Rub it in, eh? Well, that could be. Thanks, Frank."

The sheriff went back to his office and found Mort Hayes half-asleep. He said, "I want yuh to keep an eye on Smith and Jones, Mort."

"What have they done now, Eph?" asked the deputy.

"They told Frank Graves that they are the two detectives from the Cattlemen's Association that Frank asked 'em to send."

MORTON CHESTERFIELD HAYES shook his head.

"Two detectives? Them? Why, they couldn't find a black horse in a herd of white rats. Yeah, I'll watch 'em for yuh, Eph."

"Don't let 'em suspect yuh."

"Them two? Don't make me laugh. Well, I reckon I might as well start one time as another. Didja find out what Omega oil is?"

"Yeah, I reckon so. It's probably a remedy for rheumatism."

"It is, huh? I'll try and find out more for yuh, Eph."

"Never mind the oil. You find out what them two are doin' here. Find out all you can about 'em."

"I'll read 'em like a book."

"Yeah, and they'll probably shut yuh up jist like one, too."

"Two masked men held me up!" bawled Pete. "Caught me on a bad curve and I didn't have a chance!"

CHAPTER II

A Banker Dies

MORT found Tombstone and Speedy in the little lobby of the El Segundo Hotel, talking with Uncle Bob Moss, the owner. Tombstone had the floor.

"You fellers don't even know what cold weather is," he was saying. "I 'member one time, I was workin' up in Montana, up around Fort Peck, runnin' cows for a small outfit. It'd been runnin' about seventy-five below zero, and we was kinda hived up around the stove most of the time. This mornin' Ol' Mose Appleton decided that he'd go out and see how the stock was standin' the cold.

"Me and Buck Griggs was a-watchin' Mose from a winder. He got about halfway to the stable, when he stopped and we seen him open his mouth and yell somethin' at us. But he didn't move. I tell yuh, when me and Buck got out to him he was froze as stiff as a hick'ry stump. There was an icicle stickin' straight out of his mouth. Buck said, 'Tombstone, it was so cold that it froze his voice. We'll thaw out that icicle and see what Mose's last word was.'

"Well, sir, we done it. There wasn't no way to help Mose, but we did thaw out that hunk of ice and let his voice be heard. I've seen a lot of cold, but that was about the worst."

"What'd his voice say?" asked Bob Moss.

"It said," replied Tombstone soberly, "'C'mon out—I think it's startin' to thaw.'"

"Just like a phonygraft record, eh?" remarked Morton.

"Yeah, but yuh can only play it once," said Tombstone.

"I've been wonderin'," remarked Speedy soberly. "Suppose yuh thawed it in a pan, and then froze it again."

"How could yuh ever dig a grave for him?" asked Morton.

"Oh, we didn't. We jist left him a-standin' there until Spring."

"No preacher nor nothin', eh?" said Uncle Bob.

"Preacher!" snorted Tombstone. "In that kinda weather? Uncle Bob, the preacher moves out in September, and a doctor moves in. Folks are more concerned over their feet, hands and ears in the winter than they are about their souls. Anyway, who ever saw a frozen soul?"

"Yeah, I reckon they can stand quite a lot of cold."

Morton Chesterfield Hayes stayed with them that afternoon, and reported to the sheriff at supper.

"They never said no more about the oil, and they never said anythin' about bein' detectives, Eph. After all, what am I tryin' to find out about 'em? Give me somethin' definite to work on."

"Mort, what's yore private opinion of them two?" asked the sheriff.

"Pers'nally," replied Mort, "I think they're the two biggest liars that ever lived."

"Jist inoffensive, eh?"

"I didn't say that, Eph. Any time a man wears his gun like they do, it ain't for ornamental purposes."

"Stick around with 'em, Mort. They can't corrupt you."

Shortly after dark that evening Tombstone, Speedy and the deputy were sitting on the hotel porch when a young, good-looking cowboy rode into El Segundo. He saw Mort Hayes, and said to him:

"Have yuh seen Jim Melton in town, Mort?"

"I seen him go into the bank a while ago, Johnny. Mebbe he's still over there."

"Thank yuh, Mort."

The young cowboy went on.

"That's Johnny Landon," Mort said. "His father is Uncle Hewie Landon, who owns the Circle H L spread."

"He looked kinda tight around the eyes," remarked Speedy.

"Yeah, he did," agreed Mort. "Voice sounded tight, too."

"And who is Jim Melton?" asked Tombstone.

"Jim Melton," replied the deputy, "is our banker. He owns the J Bar M spread, too. Don't spend so much time in the bank these days."

"Banker, huh?" queried Tombstone. "Him? I thought the banker was that tall feller in the bank."

"No, that's Frank Graves. He's the cashier."

"I'll be darned!" breathed Speedy.

Mort chuckled quietly. "He's the feller yuh told that yuh was detectives."

"In this day and age," said Speedy soberly, "yuh can't even tell who yo're lyin' to."

"It's awful depressin'," added Tombstone solemnly.

"What made yuh tell him that?" asked Mort.

"Aw-w-w" — Speedy grinned — "we thought it'd be fun to say it to him, jist to see what he'd say. Yuh never can tell what kind of answers yuh get. He helped out the lie by sayin' that in a couple days he'd tell us why he sent for us."

"Well, ain't you fellers got anythin' better to do than to go around lyin' to folks jist to see what they'd say?"

"It's a right pleasant pastime, I'd say," replied Tombstone.

"I believe in stickin' to the truth and shamin'—"

FROM somewhere came the unmistakable report of a gun. There on the porch, it was difficult to say just where it came from. The three men stepped quickly into the street. Several men were converging in their direction, seeking the cause of the shot.

"It wasn't far away," said Mort Hayes.

A man called from the hitch-rack beyond the bank.

"Over here, men—quick!"

They all headed in that direction. There was one lamp burning in the bank, and they saw Frank Graves coming to the door, seeking the cause of the confusion. Several men were at the hitch-rack when Tombstone, Speedy and Mort Hayes arrived. Sprawled half on, half off the sidewalk, was the body of a big man.

"It's Jim Melton," a man said quietly. "Somebody better get the doctor."

Mort Hayes got down on his knees and examined him briefly.

"I'm scared he's dead, gents," he said, and got to his feet. "Anybody see what happened?"

No one had. Frank Graves, the cashier, shoved in close. Someone told him who it was. He said huskily:

"He was in the bank, talking to me, just a few minutes ago. Said he was going back to the ranch. Who on earth would shoot him?"

His question was not answered. Eph Gardner, the sheriff, came and took charge of the situation. In a few moments the doctor came. Jim Melton was dead.

They took the body away, and someone was sent to the J Bar M to notify his family.

Tombstone and Speedy drifted back to the hotel. El Segundo was shocked over the death of their most prominent citizen, and they talked over swift justice for his killer. Mort Hayes came back to the hotel in about an hour, and asked Tombstone and Speedy if they had seen Johnny Landon since the shooting.

"Yuh ain't layin' the deadwood on that kid, are yuh?" asked Tombstone.

"No-o-o-o—not me. I dunno what the deal is. Jim Melton had a letter in his pocket, an opened letter. It was from Johnny Landon to Nita Melton, askin' her to elope with him. The post-office stamp showed that it had been mailed yesterday. Jim's gone out to the J Bar M to find out more from Nita."

"That's a nice name—Nita," remarked Speedy.

"And she's a right nice girl," declared the deputy. "Prettiest girl in the country. Say! You fellers remember noticin' that this Johnny Landon acted kinda funny, kinda tightened up."

"How could we?" asked Speedy. "We never seen the gent before."

"That kinda stuff ain't evidence," said Tombstone.

"No, I reckon yo're right. I can't believe that Johnny shot him, but he asked for Jim Melton. You heard him ask for Jim Melton."

"No," lied Tombstone, "I didn't. I disremember jist what he did say. Anyway, he wasn't talkin' to us."

"You heard him, didn't you, Speedy?"

"Mort, I cain't swear that I did. Wasn't payin' no attention."

Mort thought it over and finally said, "What have you two got against the law?"

"Not a blamed thing," replied Tombstone. "As a matter of fact, we just ain't snoopy nor tattle-tales. The law means a lot of folks, and Johnny Landon is jist one. We'll let the law try him, without any help from us."

Mort rolled and lighted a cigarette, evidently thinking things over in his own mind. Finally he said quietly:

"Yeah, I reckon yo're right. Much

obliged. Yuh see, I like Johnny quite a lot m'self. See yuh *manana.*"

THE sheriff arrested Johnny Landon that night. The young cowboy admitted that he was in town when Melton was shot. In fact, he said he was across the street, standing at a hitching rack, tightening the cinch on his saddle when the shot was fired. He said he heard that Melton had been shot, and rode away.

"What can yuh do with an hombre like that?" asked Mort next morning. "He didn't need to tell all that. Nobody asked him—he jist told it."

"No lyin' ability, huh?" queried Tombstone.

"Some folks," remarked Speedy, "ain't endowed with the better things of life. If it'd been me, I'd have told them a story that everybody would believe."

"Yeah," agreed Tombstone, "and before they got through with the case, they'd have hung the judge."

"The thing that worries me and Eph," said Mort, "is that the folks around here think that the law moves too slow. Yuh know, Jim Melton was one of our best-liked men, and there's lots of talk."

"What about that letter?" asked Speedy. "The letter Jim Melton had on him."

"Oh, that. Well, as far as we can find out, Johnny wrote Nita a letter, askin' her to elope with him. He said he'd be at the ranch at eleven o'clock, and they'd go to Lone Pine and get married that night. Jim Melton got the letter in the mail, recognized the writin' and decided to open it. Yuh see, he'd refused to let 'em get married, 'cause he said he wanted Nita to go to college. Well, Johnny got all duded up and rode over there, headin' for a weddin'. He left his team and buckboard out a safe distance, and came in on foot. He reached the house, but didn't know what happened to him, until he smelled the eggs."

"Smelled what eggs?" asked Speedy.

"Well, Jim Melton and his crew laid for Johnny and blasted him with a couple dozen real ripe eggs. Johnny was a mess. He went home and cleaned up. Last evenin', standin' it as long as he could, he rode over to the J Bar M for a showdown. But Jim Melton had gone to town, so Johnny came on in. That's why he was lookin' for Jim Melton. Yuh see, Johnny Landon is awful fast with a gun, and he gets heated up awful quick."

"I don't blame him," said Speedy. "Lookin' for love—and git a ripe egg. Fine thing!"

"I'm for Johnny," declared Tombstone.

"He'll need a lot of help, Tombstone."

CHAPTER III

Holdup On Bullwhip

UNCLE Hewie Landon and Aunt Ida came in a little later. Hewie was a small, bow-legged person with a scraggly mustache and good-natured eyes. Aunt Ida, Uncle Hewie's spouse, would weigh well over two hundred, and was beloved by everybody. Mort Hayes introduced them to Tombstone and Speedy.

"We're stickin up for Johnny," declared Tombstone.

"Mort was tellin' us," sighed Uncle Hewie. "Much obliged, boys."

"Johnny," said Aunt Ida tearfully, "just wouldn't do a thing like that. I know my boy."

"'Course not," agreed Speedy.

"Believin' he didn't don't help much," sighed Uncle Hewie.

"Yo're all wrong," declared Tombstone. "If one person believes it, mebbe he can convince somebody else, and . . . Well, if yuh believe it hard enough mebbe, after while, it'll git around to the jury. If that don't work out, me and Speedy will go out and prove that he didn't do it."

"How?" asked Uncle Hewie.

"Well, gosh, yuh never can tell, Uncle Hewie. Adam killed the giant with a sling-shot, didn't he? Everybody said he couldn't do it. And Daniel slayed the lions with the jaw-bone of an ass, didn't he? What do yuh reckon the odds was against him in that fight?"

"You make the Scriptures very plain," said Aunt Ida soberly. "I suppose you have made a study of the Bible."

"Well, I've shore done a lot of listen-in', ma'am."

"To what denomination do you belong?"

"The Joneses, ma'am."

"Well, that's nice. I suppose you belong to the Smiths."

"No, ma'am—only in name," said Speedy soberly. "I'm a Republican."

"Come out to the ranch and visit us," invited Uncle Hewie. "Aunt Idy likes to argue religion, and you sound like subjects. I'd like to hear more about Daniel and the jaw-bone of an ass."

"We'll talk about Daniel, and you can furnish the rest, Hewie," said Aunt Ida soberly. "Glad to have met you, gentlemen."

"Now there," declared Tombstone, "is a wonderful woman."

"Nice folks," agreed Speedy. "Tombstone, I jist been thinkin' that if we'd only went to see Jim Melton, instead of Frank Graves, we might have some idea who killed Jim Melton."

"That's right. Jim Keaton wanted us to see Jim Melton, so it's his blasted fault—not ours. I wonder what he wanted."

"I reckon we'll have to wait and see. Mebbe I better telegraph Jim Keaton that Melton was killed last night."

"Yeah, that might be a good idea. We'll see what he says."

After much deliberation, Speedy wired:

Have to Ignore Telegram too. Banker Killed Last Night.

"That's tellin' him." Tombstone grinned. "When it comes to ignorance, we're as good as he is."

"Ignore don't mean ignorance," said Speedy.

"Don't, huh? Sounds like it did. Well, anyway, it don't matter," Tombstone returned.

They went down to the sheriff's office, where Mort Hayes was talking with Bill Heffner, foreman of the J Bar M. Mort introduced them. Heffner and Mort had been discussing the spoiled egg incident, and Heffner was quite ashamed about the whole thing.

"We didn't know they were spoiled," he said, "and Jim Melton didn't tell us about that letter. He said he was tired of Johnny hangin' around the ranch, after he told Johnny to stay away, and he thought it might be a good idea to plaster Johnny with eggs. It was a dirty trick—and look how it worked out! I

Something suddenly knocked Speedy into Tombstone

knew that Johnny was on the war-path when he came out there. He wanted to see Jim Melton. I dunno—I'm sorry, but nothin' can be done."

"Do yuh think Johnny shot him?" asked Speedy.

"I hate to, but what can yuh do? Jim Melton didn't have no enemies. That is, none that'd shoot him."

"I was jist a-wonderin'," remarked Tombstone. "Was I dreamin', or did somebody tell me that the J Bar M was losin' cattle?"

"Losin' cattle?" queried Mort quickly.

"Well, I'll tell yuh," said Heffner, carefully examining a thumbnail, "now that Jim's gone. Yuh see, he didn't want to say anythin', until he knew more about it, but the J Bar M has been losin' a lot of calves—some'ers. No, we can't pin it onto anybody. It—well, our normal calf supply has dropped fifty per cent. Mebbe Jim dropped a word about it—and it kinda got around—I dunno."

"An outsider had to hear it before I did," said Mort drily.

TOMBSTONE hadn't heard anything, but he was merely trying to find out why Jim Melton had contacted the Association. His ruse had worked out.

"I wonder how the other cowmen are stackin' up on calves," Mort said.

"I dunno, Mort. It might be a good idea to kinda ask around."

"I'll do that, Bill. Eph will be surprised, I reckon. But shucks, he's awful easy to surprise."

Bill Heffner turned to Tombstone and said:

"Was your idea that mebbe Jim Melton might have been shot by a rustler, Jones?"

"No, I wouldn't say that—not unless Jim Melton had found out who was stealin' from him."

"Could have," said Mort. "Nobody knows who met Jim Melton after he left the bank. Frank Graves said he'd only been out of the bank a few minutes, when the shot was fired."

"I dunno," sighed Heffner. "All we know is that he was killed, and they've got Johnny Landon in jail. Well, I've got to go back to the ranch. See yuh later."

Heffner stepped outside the office and looked up the street. He turned and said:

"That stage driver is travelin' like he was behind time."

"He's only ten minutes—" began Mort, when Heffner said:

"He's drivin' for the office, Mort! Somethin' has happened!"

Pete Ferris, the driver of the Santa Ysabel-El Segundo stage, whirled his team around in the street and clamped on the brake in front of the office. Pete was scrawny, turkey-necked, his thin, blond hair standing straight in the breeze. Just now he looked like a man who had seen a ghost.

The sheriff was running across the street, followed by several men from around the stage depot. Pete slumped for a moment.

The sheriff ran around to a front wheel and spoke to Pete, who pointed dumbly toward the door of the old stage. Mort threw it open, and a man's feet slid, outside, moving slowly.

"What happened, Pete?" asked the sheriff anxiously.

"Huh—holdup," whispered Pete. "Two men, and I got one!"

"Where's he at?" asked the sheriff quickly.

"Back there—back on the Bullwhip Grades. Whoee-e-e! I tell, yuh, I'm out of wind."

The men took the dead man from the stage and laid him out on the sidewalk, while a curious crowd gathered.

"All right, Pete, go ahead," the sheriff said. "What happened?"

"Two masked men held us up," replied Pete. "Caught me on a bad curve—I didn't have a chance. One of 'em said, 'Toss down the box and be mighty quick about it!' They didn't know I had a passenger. I was reachin' under the seat for the box, when I heard one of the men cuss real loud, and then I heard a gun pop. Then I heard another louder shot. I flung the box—I guess.

"I took another look. The nearest man to me was backin' up, lookin' at the stage door, so I took a chance and shot at him. He dropped his gun and went down. I went down kinda low, too, and when I got to lookin' for the other man, he was gone. I reckon he lost his nerve and pulled out, but he took the box. I got down and took a look at my passenger. He had his feet stickin' outside the stage, so I shoved his feet inside and came a-roarin'."

"Turn the body over to Doc Reber," ordered the sheriff. "We'll be ridin'

out there. All right, Mort, get the hosses."

Tombstone said quietly to Speedy, "C'mon, we're goin' along," and headed for the feed corral.

The sheriff and deputy made no comments, when Tombstone and Speedy came with their horses. Dr. Reber had gone to get his horse and buggy. Being the coroner he had to go, too, because, according to Pete Ferris, there was another dead or wounded man on the Bullwhip Grades.

It was not over three miles from town to where they found the body of a roughly dressed man sprawled in the dirt. There was a dirty, once-blue handkerchief partly around his head, the eye-holes showing that it had been used as a mask. Eph Gardner, the sheriff, swore quietly as he looked down at the man.

"Jim Bilkus," he said softly. "Jim Bilkus. Shucks, I never had any idea that Jim'd do a thing like that, Doc."

DR. REBER shook his head, as he examined the body.

Mort said to Tombstone and Speedy:

"Jim Bilkus owned a little spread back there in the hills. He was a swell feller—allus helpin' somebody. Never had much. Well—"

Mort drew a deep breath. "Yuh never can tell which way a pickle will squirt, I reckon."

"I don't reckon so." Speedy nodded. Tombstone squatted on his heels and seemed to pay little attention.

"Who do yuh reckon Jim Bilkus teamed up with in this deal, Doc?" Eph Gardner was saying.

"That's hard to tell, Eph."

He had stripped part of the shirt from the dead man, disclosing the bullet-hole. Tombstone got up and went over to look at it.

Mort whispered to Speedy, "Yore pardner's interested in bullet-holes."

Speedy said, "He's made several, but I never seen him interested in one before."

They put the body in the coroner's buggy and went back to El Segundo. Pete Ferris gave the sheriff a .32 automatic, which was on the floor of the stage. It had recently been fired.

"That's the gun I heard pop, Eph," Pete said.

The sheriff looked at it in disgust and put it in the safe.

The stage was standing outside the stable, but the team had been put away. Tombstone and Speedy went over to it. Buried in one of the spokes on the left rear wheel was a .32 bullet. Speedy looked it over soberly, and Tombstone said:

"Speedy, that feller was killed inside the stage. He never got out."

"Yeah, that's right. What about it?"

"If he fired that shot, how'd he ever hit a spoke of that hind wheel?"

Speedy drew a deep breath. "Yea-a-ah!" he grunted. "That's right. But what does that mean?"

"I dunno what it means, but I know blamed well that even one of them suicide guns don't shoot the bullet in a circle. Yuh know, I'm gettin' me a idea. Huh!"

"Take it easy," advised Speedy. "Here comes Pete Ferris."

The stage driver came over to them. He was still a little bugeyed.

"That was an awful thing, boys," he said. "I didn't know it was Jim Bilkus. Gosh, I've knowed Jim quite a while."

"Yuh was lucky that he didn't get you," said Speedy. "Yuh done exactly the right thing. Jist how did it happen, anyway? Yuh see, we didn't hear all that was said, after yuh got in, Pete."

Pete was glad to demonstrate. He got up on the seat and acted it all out for them. He pointed out where Jim Bilkus had stood, how he had dug under the seat for the strong-box, and tossed it over the top of some big packages, which had blocked his view of the side of the stage.

"Who was the feller in the stage?" asked Tombstone.

"I don't reckon he's been identified yet. I never seen him before. Looks like a drummer."

"A harp will prob'ly be quite a change for him," said Tombstone.

Mort Hayes came over to the stage, and told them that the holdup had netted ten thousand dollars, consigned to the El Segundo Bank, but they didn't know yet just what else was in the box. Two cowboys rode up to them, and Mort introduced Tombstone and Speedy. They were Tom Kelsey and Bert Moran, owners of a small spread. Both men were shocked over the death of Jim Bilkus.

"I tell yuh, Mort, it's hard to believe,"

Kelsey said, "Jim Bilkus wasn't that kind of a hairpin."

"He had a pardner," said Tombstone.

"He didn't neither," denied Moran. "There was two of em."

"Oh, yuh mean in this deal. Yeah, he did. But who could it be? Jim didn't have no close friend. He was sort of a lone wolf. He didn't drink, didn't gamble nor nothin'. After this, I'm willin' to believe anythin' I hear."

"There's lots of funny things in the world," said Tombstone. "F'r instance, did any of yuh ever hear of a six-gun that'd shoot bullets in a circle?"

"In a circle?" asked Moran. "What do yuh mean?"

"Well, f'r instance," explained Tombstone, pointing across the street with a long, lean forefinger, "suppose yuh shot toward the sheriff's office, but the bullet went plumb around in a circle and hit somethin' off here on this side of yuh. Did yuh ever see a gun like that?"

"No," replied Kelsey, "and neither did you, Jones."

"No, I never did. Jist wondered."

"That sort of a gun would be a determent," said Pete Ferris.

"It don't make sense," said Moran. "Who was the man shot in the stage?"

"Don't know yet," replied Mort. "Stranger down here. Looks like a drummer, but didn't have no valises, and nothin' to show who he was. Didn't he tell yuh anythin' Pete?"

"Nope. Paid for his ticket in Santa Ysabel, and didn't talk none. He tried to put up a fight, but they got him cold."

CHAPTER IV

Mystery On Mystery

TOMBSTONE and Speedy went back to the hotel porch, where they sat down in the shade. Uncle Bob Moss was there, enjoying some fresh air.

"Well," Uncle Bob said, "I reckon three killin's will keep the sheriff busy for a spell. Frank Graves was past here a while ago, and he's as runty as a buck-sheep over the bank losin' ten thousand dollars. It's the first stage holdup in years."

Someone inside the hotel called for him, and he went in.

"Let's go up to the bank and see what Graves has to say," Speedy said. "Yuh see, he said he'd find out why he sent for us."

"That might be fun." Tombstone grinned. "Let's do her."

Frank Graves was busy at his desk, but got up and came over to the railing.

"Have yuh made up yore mind yet?" Speedy said.

"About what?" asked Graves soberly.

"The reasons why yuh asked for the association to send us down here to see yuh."

"Oh, yes. Hm-m-m! Detectives. I suppose you have credentials?"

"What's that?" asked Speedy.

"Well—er—papers, showing who you are. Identification. Naturally, I am not employing you unless you are the genuine articles."

"I'm genuine enough," said Tombstone. "Paper, huh? Well, I dunno. What do you think, Speedy?"

"I dunno. Mister, can't yuh jist look at us and see what we are?"

"Yes, I believe I can. Mr.—uh—I don't believe I have ever heard your name."

Speedy looked the situation over soberly and said:

"From where you stand, readin' from left to right—Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith. I'm Smith."

Frank Graves wanted to laugh, but stifled the inclination.

"Really," he said, "I don't believe I have any use for you boys. The bank will offer a reward for the arrest and conviction of the men who robbed the stage, and no doubt the county will offer a reward, too. You might work on the theory of getting the rewards."

"Well, thank yuh a lot!" exclaimed Tombstone enthusiastically. "Awful nice of yuh to offer it to us."

"Yeah, we shore are much obliged," added Speedy.

They went outside and headed back for the hotel.

"Well," said Speedy, "we shore put on a dumb act that time."

"Dumb?" queried Tombstone. "He said we could work for the rewards, didn't he?"

"How can anybody be that ignorant?" asked Speedy quietly.

"Well, mebbe he ain't awful smart," agreed Tombstone, "but he still runs the bank."

Uncle Hewie Landon came to El Segundo, and he was able to identify the dead man as Steve Kane, a cattle buyer from St. Louis.

"I got a card from him," said Uncle Hewie, "and he said he'd be here today. Couldn't yuh tell by his papers and all that just who he was, Eph?"

"He didn't have a thing in his pockets and no valise," replied the sheriff.

"He didn't, eh? That don't make sense, Eph. Where's Pete Ferris?" They found the stage driver, fairly well intoxicated. He was celebrating his good luck.

"Nossir," declared Pete, "he didn't have nothin'."

"Well," sighed Uncle Hewie, "I don't understand it. I never saw a buyer travelin' that light. Somethin' is wrong, Eph."

"I dunno," said the sheriff. "It does look kinda funny."

Tombstone and Speedy were at the sheriff's office when Uncle Hewie and the sheriff came back. Hewie wanted to talk with Johnny, so the sheriff let him into the jail.

"I heard that you two are out to get the rewards," the sheriff said to Tombstone. "Frank Graves told me a while ago."

"Oh, him!" snorted Tombstone. "Yuh can't trust a secret to anybody these days."

"Oh, it's a secret, eh?"

"When we're trailin' criminals, we allus work in secret," said Speedy seriously.

"Yeah, I imagine that's a good way to do."

"That's why sheriffs are no good on that kinda work," said Tombstone.

"Oh, is that so?"

"What criminal did you ever catch?" asked Speedy.

"Well, I dunno—"

"There yuh are. Yuh don't know of any."

The big sheriff grinned slowly. "How many have you caught?" he asked.

"Ours is a secret," said Speedy soberly. "We don't talk."

UNCLE HEWIE came back from the cells and sat down with them.

"I can't figger that deal out," he declared. "It don't seem noways possible for Jim Bilkus to be a holdup man, and Steve Kane, travelin' with nothin' in his pockets and no valise. Eph, there's somethin' rotten in Denmark."

"Yeah," said Tombstone, "and it's slopped over into El Segundo."

"Are you familiar with Shakespeare?" asked Uncle Hewie soberly.

"No, I ain't—not exactly. Yuh see, I ain't been there since I was six, seven years old. Has it growed much, Uncle Hewie?"

"Things are gettin' worse and worse around here," declared the old cowman and went out, rattling his spurs on the wooden sidewalk.

"I shore hope I don't grow up to be a fussy ol' man," sighed Tombstone. "He ain't got a lick of patience."

Eph Gardner sat there at his desk, looking gloomily at Tombstone and Speedy. Finally he said:

"Tell me somethin', will yuh?"

"We're allus ready and willin' to enlighten the world," said Tombstone. "Cut yore question loose, Sheriff."

"What on earth are you two doin' down here in El Segundo?"

[*Turn page*]

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE
*F-N TEST?
*The Famous Finger Nail Test
"It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head—if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.
YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK LIKE THIS WITH NEW
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
A little Wildroot Cream-Oil does a big job for your hair. Keeps it well groomed all day long without a trace of that greasy, plastered down look! Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or toilet goods counter.
CREAM-OIL CHARLIE SAYS: "IT CONTAINS LANOLIN!"
AND TUNE IN: TWO NETWORK SHOWS! "The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sunday evenings, CBS Network; "King Cole Trio Time" Sat. afternoons, NBC Network.
LANOLIN

"Well, sir," replied Tombstone seriously, "we didn't aim to tell anybody, but it ain't so awful secret. We're workin' for the Gov'ment."

"Yeah? What kind of work, Jones?"

"You'll prob'ly laugh," replied the tall cowpoke, "but it's a serious thing, and very scientific." Tombstone leaned across the sheriff's desk and spoke confidentially, "We're down here to make a report on the effect of locoweed on human bein's."

"Locoweed on human bein's?" The sheriff scowled at Tombstone. "That's a funny one, Jones. What have yuh found out so far?"

"That there are danged few human bein's around here. C'mon, Speedy, it's time to eat."

They walked out and headed for the dining room of the hotel.

"Somebody," declared Speedy, "will shoot you some day."

"We can't live forever," chuckled Tombstone.

That night Tombstone wagered a few of their dwindling dollars on the roulette wheel at the El Rey, but without any luck. Things were quiet around El Segundo. They left the saloon and went down to the sheriff's office, where they found Mort Hayes alone.

"Any clues?" asked Speedy. "Them are things yuh find that lead yuh to the lair of the murderer, if yuh don't know."

"Glad yuh spoke of 'em," said Mort, "I'll look for some. What's new?"

"The moon," replied Speedy. "I jist saw it over m' right shoulder. What does that mean, Mort?"

"With the moon in the east," replied Mort, "it means that you was walkin' north."

"That's awful enlightnin', and I'm much obliged. I've heard it is bad luck."

"That's right," agreed Tombstone. "It shore is bad luck. My old Uncle Treadwell Jones shore proved it. One night he turned and looked at the moon over his right shoulder."

"Did, eh?" remarked Mort. "What kind of bad luck did he have?"

"Fell off a cliff and broke his neck. Pa always told me to never pay no attention to the moon, and I ain't. No matter where it is, I don't do a blamed thing about it."

They talked for a while, and Sleepy announced his intentions of getting a good night's sleep. Mort slept in the office. They left the office and started up the street. El Segundo had no street lights, and there was not a lighted window between the office and the hotel lobby. Speedy was walking on the inside, and as they went past an open spot between two buildings, something knocked Speedy into Tombstone, who whirled quickly, but his consciousness went out in a shower of spinning stars.

TOMBSTONE had no way of knowing how much later he woke up. He was conscious of a splitting headache, and something seemed to be throwing him around. Next he was conscious of voices.

"Aw, they ain't dead, and I wouldn't worry if they was," a man said. "Dump 'em both on the floor. Better see if them ropes are still tight. C'mere, Pancho. Outside. I want to talk with yuh."

Tombstone passed out again, and it was daylight when he awoke. His head didn't ache much—just a dull throb—and he seemed numb all over. It took considerable time for him to remember.

Speedy was on his side, his legs drawn up. They were in an old shack, lying on the dirt floor. Sunlight came through the cracks in the wall.

Painfully Tombstone managed to inch against the wall and draw up to a semi-sitting position. His face was smeared tight with dried blood. He could see dried blood on Speedy's head, where the sunlight lighted a strip across it, and he wondered dully if Speedy was dead. Tombstone would have sold his soul—or what was left of it—for a drink of water.

Speedy was moving a little, muttering to himself.

"Hyah comin', pardner?" Tombstone said. His voice sounded like it came from a tinny old phonograph. Speedy rolled over, facing Tombstone, and his eyes were open and blinking. He stared at Tombstone, licked his dry lips and drew a deep breath.

"We got hit hard, didn't we?" he whispered.

"We shore did," agreed Tombstone. "How do yuh feel?"

"Pretty bum." Speedy spat drily. "Where are we?"

"I dunno the location. Judgin' from the way I feel, we're fifty miles from El Segundo, and they drug me all the way. M' legs are all right, but my hand's are . . . I wonder if I've got any?"

"Yeah, you got 'em, same as mine. What happened?"

"I reckon we got drygulched. Man, they shore petted you on the head. Yo're all swelled up on top."

"So are you. Man, yo're bloody! I didn't think yuh had that much blood in yore veins. I wonder what they're goin' to do to us."

"I heard one of 'em say that they didn't care whether we're alive or dead."

"Yuh did? Why, imagine that! Hard-hearted folks, eh?"

"Awful indifferent, seems like to me. Sh-h-h-h! Turn over!"

CHAPTER V

Tombstone Has A Kick

SPEEDY sprawled quickly, turning his head back to the position it was when he woke up. Someone was walking up to the door. It was a short, stocky Mexican. He came in but did not close the door. For several moments he stood there, looking at the two men.

"You wake up, eh?" he said. "I theenk you are died. Maybe better."

Tombstone had pulled almost to a sitting position, his back braced against the rough wall. Now he began swaying forward and backward, lifting his bent knees and feet off the floor. Then he emitted a groan. The Mexican came forward cautiously.

"W'at ees wrongs weeth you?"

"Water!" whispered Tombstone. "Water! I'm dyin'!"

"Shut off, biffore I keek the face off."

"Water—water!" begged Tombstone.

The Mexican swore in Spanish, but went over to a corner, filled an old can from a jug and came back to Tombstone who kept up his calisthenics. Tombstone could not take the water, because his hands were tied behind him. The man leaned over Tombstone, holding the can of water.

"Steek the face up!" he snapped. "*Por Dios,* I weel—"

Tombstone, groaning like a lost ghost, rocked back just a bit further, his feet jerked up, and both feet hit the unsuspecting Mexican almost in the middle of his squat body. The full force of Tombstone's lithe muscles, his shoulders braced against the wall, plus plain desperation, was like the kick of a mule.

The man was fairly lifted off his feet, flung backward, and his head struck the side of the doorway. Slowly he slid, face down, half-out of the doorway and lay still.

"Set 'em up in the other alley!" whispered Speedy.

Tombstone took a deep breath and began hunching across the floor.

"It's a long way to El Segundo," warned Speedy. "Yuh won't have no seat in them overalls."

"I've got me a idea, Speedy."

Tombstone reached the inert body, inched himself around, and with numb fingers, managed to slip the man's knife from the sheath on his belt.

"All right—come a-slidin', Speedy. I'll hold the knife-point in the dirt, and you git yore ropes against it. Back around here, and I'll have yuh loose. Wait! I'll brace it against my overalls. My hands don't grip worth a darn. All right—start rubbin', pardner."

In a few minutes they were both free, and trying to rub circulation into their numb hands and feet. It was a painful, but necessary operation.

The Mexican had an old single-action Colt .41, and there was an old 45-70 carbine in the cabin. They took the two guns and went outside. The shack was deep in the brush and far up in the hills. In fact, the valley was only a blue haze below them. They studied their surroundings, and Tombstone said:

"We're in a canyon, seems t' me. Look at that rocky rim all the way around. Man, we're up high. Why, that main divide ain't far from here."

"There's a brush corral down there," said Speedy. "I can see one hoss. Mebbe we can ride back."

Tombstone took another look at the unconscious man in the doorway, shook his head and came on.

"I'm afraid I kicked him too far," he told Speedy. "I never did know my own strength."

"I know mine," said Speedy, "and it ain't much. That knock on the head shore oiled m' hinges. I want to collapse all the time."

They found one horse and an old sad-

dle in the brush corral. It had to be enough. Luckily the horse was a big, husky brute, and made no objections to a double load.

They rode down the trail for about a half-mile, where they ran into cows and calves. Some of them were J Bar M cows, with unbranded calves. Further down were quite a number of calves, branded, but they could not see what the mark was. Then they came to a narrow spot, where a pair of poles had been set to block the trail effectively.

They took them down, rode through and left them down. Behind them came cows and calves, stringing down the hills.

"Somebody's goin' to be sore, losin' their cows and calves thataway," said Speedy.

THE trail ended at that point. They sat on the horse and squinted at the hills below them.

"The main thing is to git into the lower valley, Speedy," Tombstone said, "and I reckon one place is as good as another. How's yore head?"

"Spinnin' a little. If yuh see a canyon that looks like water, head for it, will yuh? I shore need some fluid."

"I don't see nothin' but cows and calves," said Tombstone. "It's a funny thing, don'tcha know it, keepin' cows and calves . . . Wait! Speedy, I'll betcha we've found out somethin'! Somebody—"

Whap! A bullet hit their horse, and a breath later they were sprawled in the brush. The report of the rifle was still echoing through the hills when they sat up and took stock.

"Somebody else found out somethin', too," Speedy said drily.

Tombstone had the old .45-.70 and was trying to locate a target. Another bullet sprayed brush cuttings on them, but was too high to do any damage.

"Figgered we was crawlin' away," grinned Tombstone.

The next bullet was at least three feet high. Speedy sighed and rested his shoulders against the dead horse, as he examined the old .41 six-shooter.

"Ain't been oiled since eighteen hundred and eighty," he declared. "See anythin', pardner?"

"Jist cows and calves. Yuh know, Speedy, I've got me a idea."

Pwee-e-e! A bullet struck a rock near them, and went singing into the distance.

"I reckon I ain't alone in m' ideas, Speedy. C'mon!"

It was tough crawling, but they made it. On the side of the swale the cover was six feet high. They sprawled in a little clearing and rubbed their sore knees.

"Life," declared Tombstone, "is mighty tough in this region."

"Life has its disadvantages," agreed Speedy. "I'd trade my first-class headache for a cup of third-grade water. Bein' petted on the head with a gun-barrel shore gives yuh a headache."

"Life is fleetin', too," added Tombstone soberly.

"Yeah, and we better do a little fleetin' of our own. I'm hungry."

"Yuh know, Speedy, a question jist struck me. Why are they shootin' at us? What have we done to deserve it?"

"That's right—what? Yuh know, we've been shot at so much that we don't even ask why. A fine thing! I'll have some ham and aigs, if yuh don't mind."

"Let's do a sneak down this brush," suggested Tombstone. "We can't spend all our lives hidin' in the brush."

It was past noon that day when Uncle Hewie, sitting on the porch of the Circle HL, talking to Aunt Ida and Nita Melton, saw two decrepit-looking creatures crossing the yard. They were Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith.

"Heavenly angels!" Aunt Ida said.

They stopped against the porch and tried to grin.

Uncle Hewie said, "What on earth happened to you two?"

"We went f'r a ride and had t' walk back," said Speedy weakly.

"You boys have been hurt," exclaimed Aunt Ida. "Hewie, look at their heads! They're a mess!"

"We're fine, Aunt Ida," declared Speedy. "We jist look bad."

"You come right in the house. Hewie, you get some hot water! Nita, this is Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith. Hewie told you about them."

"Not all about us, f'r heaven's sake!" gasped Tombstone.

"Well, enough. The sheriff is looking for you. You never used your room at the hotel, and they found blood all over the sidewalk between the sheriff's office and the hotel."

"Never mind my head," said Speedy. "I'm hongry."

"I'll sew you up and then fill you up, young man."

"Better use bailin'-wire on him, Aunt Ida," advised Tombstone. "Thread pulls out so easy on him."

"Who beat yuh up?" asked Uncle Hewie anxiously.

"That," replied Tombstone, "is a secret."

"What do yuh mean, a secret?"

"Nobody knows it except the fellers that beat us up."

"Never mind who!" snapped Aunt Ida. "You get hot water."

"That ort to be easy—I'm in it most of the time," mumbled the old cowman, as he hurried away.

FOLLOWING Aunt Ida into the house, they sat down in easy chairs. Nita came in. Even in their hazy eyesight she was beautiful. She said timidly:

"They said you were helping Johnny —and I want to thank you."

"Well, ma'am," said Speedy painfully, "mebbe we are, but this is a funny way to show it."

"This is only preliminary," said Tombstone. "Yuh should see what we'll look like when it's all over."

"Oh, I hope not!"

Uncle Hewie came in. "I've got two gallons of water heatin'," he told them. "Idy's in her glory now. She shore likes to hop onto a cripple. What in heck happened to you two, anyway?"

"We don't know," replied Speedy. "Somebody popped us, and we woke up in a shack, way back in the hills. Tombstone outsmarted the feller who was guardin' us, and we got away on one hoss. Then somebody started shootin' at us, and killed the horse. We've been walkin' ever since."

"Sa-a-y!" exclaimed Tombstone. "We was in a land-locked canyon up there, and it was full of cows and calves. Lotsa J Bar M's."

"Cows and calves? Is that so?"

"Wait a minute!" grunted Tombstone. "I've got it! The J Bar M have been losin' calves. Somebody has been herdin' cows and young calves up there, holdin' 'em until the calves wean, and then slappin' their brand on the mavericks. Lotsa feed and water, I reckon."

"Can yuh find that canyon again?" asked Uncle Hewie.

"I—I dunno. Can you, Speedy?"

"If I had some ham and eggs mebbe I could. But not on an empty stummick."

Late that afternoon Uncle Hewie took Tombstone and Speedy to El Segundo, their heads bandaged. The sheriff and Mort Hayes came up to the hotel, seeking the cause of their injuries. Tombstone told the sheriff what had happened to them, and also about the cows and calves.

"Can yuh lead us to that canyon?" asked the sheriff.

"Well, I'll tell yuh," replied Tombstone, "we never went there. All we done was get away. When I start goin' some place, I never look back. Mebbe we can find it—I dunno."

There was a passenger on the stage that evening. He took a room at the hotel, and they heard him talking to Uncle Bob Moss about missing the stage yesterday. He had heard about the passenger getting shot, and Uncle Bob said:

"Yuh're lucky yuh wasn't on the stage."

After the man went up to his room, Speedy asked Uncle Bob who the man was.

"This is his first trip down here," said the hotelkeeper. "He's a Mr. Howe, a bank examiner."

CHAPTER VI

Lynch Talk

IT WAS a relief to Tombstone that the sheriff had his six-shooter. When he was knocked down, the gun had fallen out of his holster, and had been picked up on the sidewalk the next morning. Speedy's gun was missing, but he had the old forty-one, which he had cleaned and oiled.

Bill Heffner, foreman of the J Bar M spread, came in to talk with Tombstone and Speedy. Nita had told him about the experiences of the two, and the discovery of some J Bar M cows and calves in a shut-in canyon.

They were not able to give Heffner much information. Tombstone told him that they were going to try to find the place again.

It was Saturday night, and the folks

of the surrounding country were in town. Liquor flowed freely, and there was a lot of talk about the murder of Jim Melton. Melton was to be buried tomorrow. The ranch folks were not interested in the killing of the stock buyer, nor the killing of Jim Bilkis, but they did want swift justice meted out to Johnny Landon. The law would do it—quick, or else.

Tombstone and Speedy went down to the sheriff's office, where the sheriff and Mort Hayes were talking things over. The sheriff was frankly worried about the talk in the saloons. It was his sworn duty to protect Johnny Landon, but he knew how long he would last, if the crowd wanted revenge.

"Well," Mort said, "I ain't sleepin' in that jail alone, I'll tell yuh that. If they had to bust in, with me shootin' at 'em, what'd happen to me? One man couldn't hold 'em."

"One of us has got to stay with the crowd, ready to nip things in the bud, if they start," declared the sheriff.

"We'll sleep in the jail with yuh, Mort," offered Speedy. "I ain't crazy about that bed at the hotel, if yuh ask me. Yuh never know who might come up there. It's been done before, yuh know."

"I'd like a nice, cozy, safe jail," yawned Tombstone, "and I'd like to hit the hay real soon."

"Same here," said Speedy. "I slept awful sound last night, but it shore tired me out. How about it?"

"I'd be awful glad," said the sheriff. "With three of yuh in there, I'm pretty shore yuh could stop a mob."

"I'll tell yuh what we'll do," offered Tombstone. "We'll go up to our room, come down the back stairs and straight over to the jail. If any of them owlhoots see us, they'll think we went to bed up there."

"Yuh still worryin' about somebody?" asked the sheriff.

"Look at our heads," said Speedy. "Jist figger out how sore they are, and quit wonderin' if we want to get petted up there again."

"Yeah, I reckon they're plenty sore. Go ahead—and thanks."

"I'll go over and fix up three cots," said Mort. "See yuh pretty quick, boys."

"I'll lock the office and go back to the El Rey," said the sheriff. "They're talkin' too much over there."

Tombstone and Speedy were alert while walking up the street this time. They went up to their room, and met the bank examiner in the hallway. He had the room next to them. They did not enter their room, but went down the back stairs and over to the jail.

Mort was making up the cots, and Johnny Landon was watching him curiously. He was more curious when Tombstone and Speedy came in.

"What's goin' on here?" he asked.

"Too much talk, Johnny," replied Mort.

"Oh, I see," said Johnny thinly. "About me, eh? I *sabe* what it's all about now. A fine bunch of wolves. Old friends of mine. Can't even wait for a trial."

"Take it easy, kid," advised Tombstone. "We'll stick here."

"Yeah, I think yuh would, Jones. But —well, we'll see. This jail ain't dynamite proof."

"Now, yuh've got me all goose pimples!" wailed Speedy. "Don't say things like that. I'm lookin' forward to a good sleep—and I'll get it, if I have to shoot El Segundo loose from its population."

"What happened to yore heads?" asked Johnny.

"Johnny," said Speedy, "did yuh ever hear of a free-nol-ogist?"

"Shore. They read the bumps on yore head."

"I wish I knowed one. I'd like to see what mine says. Somebody caressed us with a gun-barrel last night, hauled us way up in the hills and left us with a Mexican guard, in a shack in a canyon, filled with cows and calves."

"Yea-a-ah!" breathed Johnny. "And then what?"

SPEEDY answered him carelessly. "Oh, it worked out all right. Tombstone kicked the Mexican loose from his boots, and we cut ourselves loose with his knife."

"I see-e-e. Yuh don't know who done it, eh?"

"Nope. We took the one hoss at the shack and pulled out, but somebody shot the hoss out from under us, and we ended up at the Circle HL, wearin' blisters and top-knots."

"And Nita Melton was out there," added Speedy.

"She was?" gasped Johnny.

"Uh-huh. Aunt Ida sewed us up."

"Nita out there!" marveled Johnny.

"Mebbe she don't think—"

"That you done it?" queried Tombstone. "Don't be foolish. She thanked us for helpin' yuh."

"For helpin' me? Are you—uh—helpin' me?"

"Some of 'em seem to think we are," said Tombstone drily, "but pers'nally, I think we'll be lucky to come out of it alive ourselves. Jist be glad yo're safe in jail, when things like this happen to folks who are free."

"I'm goin' to bed and goin' to sleep," declared Speedy. "Wake me up, and I'll start throwin' forty-ones."

"Do you shoot a forty-one?" asked Johnny.

"I do now. They swiped my gun, but I got this'n off the Mexican."

"Let me look at that gun, will yuh?"

"Why, shore. I'll get it."

"At a distance only!" snorted Mort. "Remember, this man is in jail."

"Never mind," Johnny laughed. "It ain't important. I traded an old forty-one to Tom Kelsey about a year ago."

"Kelsey?" queried Speedy. "I think I've met him."

"Yuh prob'ly have. Him and Bert Moran own the M K. Nice boys."

"Oh, yeah, I remember them. Mort introduced us over by the stable, when we was lookin' at the stage."

Mort laughed. "I remember that. What was the idea of askin' them if they ever saw a gun that shot in a circle?"

"Yuh never find out anythin', if yuh don't ask, Mort."

Things were not going too good at the El Rey. Too much whisky and too much talk. Eph Gardner, the sheriff, watched and listened closely, but he realized that he couldn't watch everybody. Men drifted out gradually, disappearing in the darkness.

The sheriff walked up and down the main street, into two small saloons and back to the El Rey. The hitchracks were still filled with horses, attesting to the fact that the men were still in town.

"They're buryin' Jim tomorrow," he heard a man say, "and we'd better settle things tonight."

He knew what they meant. He went down past the office, intending to check with Mort at the jail when he saw a light through an opening in the big, sliding doors of the livery-stable. It was just past eleven o'clock. He went over there and peered between the doors. At least a dozen men were grouped around a single lantern, and one of them was constructing a noose.

There were only two doors to the big stable, front and rear. As quietly as possible he eased the two doors shut and clicked the big padlock. No one heard him. He trotted around to the rear. The door was closed, but there was no lock. However, the door opened outward, so he found two lengths of four by four, and braced them solidly. At least, they would have a job getting out. Then he went back to the front.

Someone had discovered that the door was locked, and the word was being passed. Others tried the rear door, and came back.

"Yeah, I locked yuh in!" called the sheriff. "You all deserve to be locked in. Just stay there and cool off."

There was no comment. The situation was ridiculous. One man laughed, and it relieved the tension.

"At least, wait until the boy has been found guilty," the sheriff said. "Yuh don't want to hang an innocent man—or do yuh?"

"All right, Eph," said one of the men. "Unlock the door and go away. We'll think it over."

"I'm takin' yore word, even if I don't know any of yuh."

The sheriff unlocked the door and walked back to the front of his own office. The men filed out, broke up into groups and went up the street. They didn't want to face him.

THE sheriff smiled with satisfaction. He was sure that everything would work out right now. It would be difficult for anybody to work up the mob spirit with those men again. He was about to go back to the jail and tell Mort that he could sleep in peace when an explosion seemed to rip part of the front of the hotel loose and dump it into the street. Debris rattled against the front of the El Rey Saloon and into the street.

All four men in the jail were asleep when the explosion jerked them out of their slumber.

"Here they come, boys!" Tombstone yelled. "Wait'll yuh see the whites of their eyes!"

Mort tried to find the lamp, and fell down over Speedy, who yelped:

"They're shakin' the jail down on us!"

Glass crashed to the floor and Mort

swore hollowly.

"I've busted the dad-blasted lamp!" he wailed. "Don't light a match. I'm all over kerosene."

Tombstone was leaning against the jail door, listening.

"I cain't hear a blamed thing," he complained. "Yes, I can, too! They're comin'!"

Someone hammered on the door, and the sheriff's voice yelled:

"Mort! Mort! Wake up! They've dynamited the hotel!"

"Hp-u-u-uh?" gasped Mort. "Mistook it for the jail, Eph?"

"No, yuh blamed fool! They ain't after Johnny. C'mon out—all of yuh!"

"Johnny, too?"

"No, yuh blamed idiot!"

"Are yuh shore that's the sheriff's voice?' asked Speedy.

"Yeah, it's him," replied Mort. "He's the only one who knows I'm an idiot."

"It must be a comfort to yuh," said Tombstone. "C'mon."

None of them had undressed, so it required only a few moments to go out, lock the jail and head for the main street where everybody in El Segundo was grouped. A section of the front wall, covering three rooms, had been blown into the street. All the rest of the windows were broken.

"The death list was awful!" whispered an inebriated cowboy. "Mus' have been millions killed. I never saw so many crippled bed-bugs on the street in m' life."

"Did any persons git killed," asked Tombstone.

A man stared at Tombstone. "You did," he said. "Uncle Bob said that you and yore pardner must have been blowed out of the county. He said he knowed yuh was up there."

Tombstone and Speedy worked their way over to the lobby where the sheriff and Uncle Bob Moss were talking to the bank examiner. He was apparently all right.

"Why, I had just left the hotel," he said. "Couldn't sleep, so I went for a walk."

They managed to get up the stairway to the hall, which was badly wrecked. Directly below the three rooms was a store room, empty now, but covered with debris. The floors of the rooms had been badly smashed. Someone found Tombstone and Speedy's war-sacks over in front of the El Rey.

On the back porch of the hotel they found a sack containing two dozen sticks of high-percentage dynamite, a length of fuse and several detonators. Evidently someone had tossed a dynamite bomb into one of the rooms, and got away before the blast. From the extra damage, it was probably in the bank examiner's room. Had anyone been sleeping in either of the three rooms, he'd have been killed instantly.

CHAPTER VII

Plumb Occult

EPH GARDNER, the sheriff, had the jitters. Too many things had happened in El Rey. He questioned the bank examiner, who had no idea what it was all about. His was merely a routine job, and this was his first trip to El Segundo.

"And if you don't mind," he said gravely, "it will be the last."

Tombstone, Speedy, Eph Gardner and Mort Hayes went down to the office. The sheriff asked the two cowpokes to sit down.

"This is no time to lie," he told them. "Yuh've told all kinds of reasons why yo're down here. I want the truth. I figger that dynamite was supposed to kill you two, and I'm bettin' yuh know why."

"Somebody," said Tombstone, "is mad at us, Eph."

"Who is mad at yuh?" snapped the sheriff.

"If we knew," said Speedy, "we'd turn in the remains."

"Yuh don't know, eh? They beat yuh over the head, kidnap yuh, shoot at yuh, and now they try to dynamite yuh—and yuh don't know why!"

"I'll tell yuh my opinion," said Tombstone gravely. "They don't want us around here."

"That remark ain't funny!" snapped the exasperated sheriff. "Why do yuh stay here, if somebody is tryin' to kill yuh?"

"He's stubborn, Sheriff," answered

Speedy soberly.

"Stubborn? What about you?"

"Well, I'll tell yuh, Sheriff," said Speedy. "I promised his pa that I'd look after him."

Eph Gardner leaned back in his chair, his jaw set tightly. After a few moments he said huskily:

"When yuh came here yuh told Frank Graves yuh were detectives from the Cattle Association. Yuh told him he'd sent for yuh. I sent a wire to the Association, asking if you two were detectives. Here is the reply."

The sheriff opened his desk and took out a telegram, his mouth grim. He read slowly:

"'Replying to yore query, I can only say that I am not sufficiently versed in occult science to give yuh an answer.'"

"What is occult science?" asked Speedy.

"I looked that up in a dictionary. I figger it's the ability to see things that are hidden."

"Pshaw!" snorted Tombstone. "We ain't hidin' from anybody."

"I give up," sighed the sheriff. "Jones, yo're the dumbest-actin' person I ever knew."

"He ain't actin', Sheriff," said Speedy.

"Well," the lawman said wearily, "if you two want to stay around here and get killed, I reckon that's yore business. I only hope that some innocent folks don't get killed with yuh. Yuh know blamed well that somebody blew up half the hotel tonight, tryin' to kill you two."

"I figger they dumped that dynamite in the bank examiner's room," said Speedy. "It's wrecked worse than ours."

"That's a silly idea. The man is a stranger."

"We're strangers, too, and they're tryin' to kill us."

"Wait a minute. When yuh left the office yuh said yuh'd go up to the hotel, make believe yuh was goin' to bed, and then leave by the back stairs. Yuh was lookin' for somethin' like this, eh? Yuh knew they'd dynamite yuh, eh? Occult—that's it. Mebbe they got that telegram mixed up a little. Are you two fellers occult?"

"I didn't want to say anythin'—" Tombstone smiled, "but yuh kinda wormed it out of us."

"I see-e-e. Mort, take 'em back to the jail. There's no chance for them to sleep in the hotel."

"Don't yuh want to ask us any more questions?" queried Speedy.

"I don't!"

As they started to leave the office, the bank examiner came in. He seemed rather apologetic.

"Sheriff," he said, "there isn't a place left in the hotel for me to sleep, and I wondered if—well, I wouldn't mind sleeping in the jail."

"Why, shore! Mort, you fix up an extra cot for him. There's plenty room."

"He can have my cot," said Tombstone quickly. "I'm sleepin' in the livery-stable."

"Why?" asked Mort flatly.

"I'm occult," replied Tombstone soberly. "Them dynamiters was either after us or after him. It's bad enough to be blowed through wood walls, but I draw the line at brick and iron."

"What about you, Speedy?" asked Mort.

"I'm jist as occult as he is," replied Speedy. "C'mon, Tombstone."

They closed the door behind them. The bank examiner said:

"I don't understand, sheriff. They talk queerly. Is it because of the bumps on their heads?"

"No, I reckon yuh'd have to go deeper than that."

NOTHING further happened that night. The would-have-been lynchers went home, glad that things had turned out the way they did, the bank examiner spent his first night in jail, while Tombstone and Speedy slept in the hay.

Bill Heffner, foreman of the J Bar M, rode in next morning. He was anxious to find out more about that hidden canyon and the cows and calves. The sheriff told Mort to go with him, and after breakfast Tombstone, Speedy, Mort and Bill Heffner rode out of El Segundo. They went past Uncle Hewie Landon's ranch, where Tombstone believed he could retrace their wanderings down from the hidden shack.

It was easier said than done, but with the help of Speedy, they spent several hours working their way back toward the main divide, where they finally encountered the sheer walls of the wide canyon. Working back down along the rim, they came into the big swale and located the entrance.

The two bars had been taken away.

The rustlers evidently figured that an investigation would be made, so they had destroyed the gateway. The four men rode cautiously to the old shack, hidden deep in the brush. Neither Mort nor Heffner had ever been in the canyon, nor did they know it was there. Riding past the entrance, it looked merely like a broken pile of rocks, with heavy brush.

The old shack was empty. Either somebody had taken the unconscious guard away, or he had been able to travel under his own power. They found remains of small branding fires, but no cows nor calves. There was plenty of evidence that cattle had been held in there, and for several months. Hanging on the brush corral were a number of old running irons.

"That's a new rustlin' scheme," declared Heffner. "They herded cows with new calves in here, held them until weanin' time and slapped their own brands on the calves. No wonder we ran short of calves. The next thing is to find out who done it."

"This," said Mort quietly, "is the spread of the M K."

"Kelsey and Moran, eh?" said Heffner. "What's keepin' us here?"

It was a long, rough ride down those brushy slopes to the little ranch house of the M K. There was no sign of life around the place. Mort said:

"After all, I'm the law, boys. Just et me do the talkin'."

They rode in close to the ranch house. Tombstone could look into one of the front windows from his saddle. Mort called from the door:

"Nobody home, boys. Here's a note on the door, which says, 'Gone to Santa Ysabel. Will be back Monday."

"Well, that's that," said Heffner. "They've got some explainin' to do on Monday, I'll tell yuh that much."

It was the middle of the afternoon when they got back to El Segundo. Bill Heffner went down to have a talk with the sheriff. Uncle Bob Moss had another room fixed up for Tombstone and Speedy. They looked it over, decided it was not dynamite-proof, but comfortable. After Uncle Bob went back down the stairs, Tombstone pulled off his boots and sprawled on the bed, while Speedy tried to shave with cold water and laundry soap.

"It's funny about the sign on that door, Speedy," remarked the lanky cowpoke.

Speedy stopped rubbing his stubbled chin to turn and look at Tombstone.

"What was funny about it?" he asked.

"There was somebody in that house."

"Huh? Yuh ain't gone *plumb* occult, have yuh?"

"Nope. I just saw 'em through the window."

Speedy came over to the bed. "Oh, you saw somebody in there, did yuh? Why didn't yuh say somethin' at the time?"

"Well, I'll tell yuh," drawled Tombstone, "the man had a twin-barreled shotgun in his hands, and who am I to die to save somebody's calves?"

Speedy went back, lathered his face some more and picked up his razor.

"Yuh know," he remarked, "sometimes I look at you—and wonder."

"Aw, I don't want any credit for it," said Tombstone deprecatingly. "Anybody's liable to git smart once in a while. . . ."

IT WAS about nine o'clock next morning when Tombstone and Speedy limped into the little dining room of the hotel. Eph Gardner, the sheriff, and Mr. Howe, the bank examiner, were eating breakfast. The two cowpokes sat down at the next table.

"Well, I see yo're still alive," remarked the sheriff.

"Yuh've got awful good eyesight," replied Tombstone. "How do yuh like sleepin' in a jail, Mr. Howe?"

"I was too nervous to sleep much, thank you, but I did well enough, I suppose. Well, Sheriff, I suppose I may as well start working."

"It's only nine o'clock," said the sheriff, looking at his watch. "The bank don't open until ten, yuh know."

"Not to the public," Howe smiled. "Of course, Mr. Graves will have no objections to me starting early. Bankers are usually glad to have the job finished, I believe."

"I suppose. It's been kind of a wild few days around here. In fact, Segundo is usually a quiet spot."

"Yuh've had a couple Joners around," said Speedy. "All we have to do is show up in a town, and somethin' happens."

"I hope that things have quit happenin'," sighed the sheriff. "We'll prob'ly go on for years now, and nothin' will—"

The sheriff stopped and half-arose from his chair. From somewhere came the sound of two muffled shots.

"What was that?" he asked sharply "Sounded like—"

"Somebody yellin'!" interrupted Speedy. "C'mon!"

The four men ran out through the lobby and into the street. There was only a narrow vacant lot between the hotel and the bank. Several men were running across from the El Rey, and Frank Graves was in front of the bank yelling at the top of his voice:

"Robbers! Help! Help! Stop him! Stop him!"

The sheriff yelled a question at the excited banker, who yelled back, waving both arms:

"Outside! Out the back, Sheriff! Stop him! He's got the money!"

They ran around to the rear of the bank, but there was no one in sight. Graves followed them around, his face as white as though he had seen a ghost. He was too excited to talk.

"Those shots!" panted the sheriff. "What happened?"

"I—I shot!" panted the banker weakly. "I didn't know—"

"You shot?" queried the sheriff. "Wait! Let's go in."

CHAPTER VIII

Shore Ruined

PETE FERRIS, the stage driver, and Mort joined them. They all went in through the back entrance, which was open. The crowd was trying to get into the front of the bank, but Graves had shut the door, which was on a spring-lock. The sheriff closed and locked the back door. No use letting all those men in.

Sprawled on the floor of the bank were two men, masks over their faces. The men edged aside, looking at them. Frank Graves leaned against the wall, weak from the horror of it all. Tombstone went over to the counter where a pump shotgun was lying. He picked it up and was examining it, while the others were more concerned with the inert figures on the floor.

The sheriff carefully removed the masks and stood back, his face grim as he looked down.

"Tom Kelsey and Bert Moran!" whispered Mort. "Both dead!"

The sheriff turned to Frank Graves and said:

"Frank, how on earth did this happen?"

"It was terrible, Eph!" he whispered. "I—I believe I can tell you most of it."

Graves went behind the counter. He wanted something to lean on.

"I always come in the back way in the morning," he said. "I didn't see anybody until I unlocked the back door, when a man stuck a gun into my back. There were three of them, all masked. They made me open the safe and put the money in their sack. They—they crouched low, so nobody could see them from the street. You see, the front of the bank fixtures blocks off the view.

"I—I tried to—to argue with them, but they said they'd kill me if I didn't obey their orders. I don't know how much money they got away with, but it was a lot. Then one of them said, 'That's all, I guess. I'll take the money and pull out. Better get out of here as quick as yuh can, before somebody shows up."

"He took the money and went out the back way. The other two were rather nervous. They went outside the railing and I followed them over to the counter. I had no idea what to do until I remembered the shotgun, which we always keep on that shelf.

"I grabbed the gun. I thought they were going, but they turned, just as I put the gun over the counter. One of them said, 'Look out—he's got a gun!' "

The banker's shoulders sagged and his voice was merely a husky whisper, as he said.

"I—I hardly remember shooting. It was all so sudden."

"Things like that usually are," said Tombstone.

"But what about the man with the money?" asked the banker. "Don't you realize that he is the one we want? The bank can't survive a loss like that! We are ruined—ruined!"

No one spoke for several moments, then Tombstone drawled:

"Yeah, yo're shore ruined, Graves."

The men all looked at Tombstone. The tall cowboy grinned faintly.

"I didn't mean—personally," Graves said.

"I did."

"You—uh—" began the banker.

"Yeah," said Tombstone, "yo're ruined personally. Yuh see, Mr. Graves, I was out back there when yuh was yellin', and nobody ever came out that back door this mornin'. Three of yuh went in, but nobody came out. Looks bad for yuh, eh?"

The sagging helplessness of Graves vanished in a flash. He swept up that pumpgun and swung the muzzle to cover the crowd.

"I'll blast the first man who moves!" he snarled. "I mean it."

"Graves, have yuh gone crazy?" gasped the sheriff.

"Not too crazy," said Tombstone calmly. "Yuh see, he shot Jim Melton and then he—"

"You poor fool, of course I killed Jim Melton. I'll kill the rest of you, too, if you try to stop me. Melton was a fool. He gave me twelve hours to replace thousands. But that is all past. You can't stop me. Back up—all of you! Keep your hands up. Jones, you crazy fool, back up with the rest!"

"Aw, I'm tired of bein' shoved around," drawled Tombstone. "You and yore gang of killers. Why, I'm—"

"Tombstone," pleaded the sheriff, "don't be a fool."

"I cain't help it, Eph. I was born thataway. In fact, I don't believe this white-faced crook has nerve enough to pull the trigger."

But Graves did.

He leveled the gun straight at the thin middle of Tombstone Jones—and pulled the trigger.

THERE was only a dull click as the hammer fell on an empty chamber. As quick as a flash Graves pumped the gun and pulled the trigger again, but again it clicked impotently.

Graves dropped the shotgun, whirled and dived for his desk, but Tombstone vaulted the counter and caught the man in his long arms, just as Graves tried to grab a gun for himself from a half-opened drawer.

As Tombstone whirled around, gripping the cursing Graves in his arms, a man yelped sharply and went down hard on the bank floor. Speedy's voice said sharply:

"Yuh wasn't leavin' us, was yuh, Pete? Why, I . . . oh, yuh would, would yuh!"

Speedy landed on top of the stage-driver and wrested a gun from his hand. Tombstone shoved Graves against the counter, holding him there easily. The fight had entirely gone out of the banker.

"Sheriff," said Speedy, "yuh better put a couple safety-pins on Pete. Mebbe he'd talk better, if his hands was tied."

"How about you talkin', Graves?" asked Tombstone.

"How about you, Pete?" asked Speedy. "Mind talkin', or don't yuh want to knot a rope around yore friend Graves' neck? A little talkin' might save yuh a few years."

"I'll talk," whined Pete. "I'll tell what I know."

"Shut up, you fool!" snarled Graves.

"Yo're a dirty doublecrosser," declared Pete. "Yuh had to have a robbery this mornin', so yuh framed with Tom and Moran to pull the job. They was to git their split, but yuh killed 'em, 'cause yuh wanted it all. Yuh already had the money out of the safe."

"That's interestin'," said the sheriff. "Keep goin', Pete."

"Why was the cattle buyer and Jim Bilkus killed?" Tombstone Jones then asked.

"They thought the man was the bank examiner," replied Pete. "Jim Bilkis rode in on us—they had to kill him. Moran threw the dynamite in the bank examiner's room last night. They thought all of yuh was asleep. Kelsey and Moran got scared of you and Smith, so they knocked yuh both out and took yuh away. They wanted yuh out of the way till Frank Graves was in the clear. Yuh see, they was workin' for Graves, stealin' calves. But yuh wasn't comin' back."

"I—well, I knew about things. Graves paid me—a little. All I done was fake that holdup. I know I didn't shoot anybody."

"I figgered it was a fake," said Tombstone. "Yuh said that the passenger fired one shot, and that's why he got killed. But he didn't fire that shot. One of the gang shot that automatic, jist to make the evidence look good, but they made a mistake and shot that bullet into a spoke of the stage wheel. That's why I asked about a gun that shoots bullets

in a circle."

"Yeah," said Pete vacantly. "Yeah, that's right."

"Johnny Landon is cleared," said Mort. "My golly, that's good news!—I wonder what them necktie—artists will think."

"Here's Doc Reber, hammerin' on the back door," said the sheriff.

They let him in. The sheriff leaned on the counter and looked at Tombstone, who grinned wryly.

"Yuh're a wonder," the lawman said quietly.

"Aw, it wasn't anythin'," said Tombstone. "While everybody else was busy, I took the shells out of that shotgun."

"I didn't mean that, Jones. I mean, yuh made Graves crack, when yuh said yuh was out behind the bank and that third man never came out. Yuh wasn't. Yuh was eatin' breakfast with us."

"Eph," said Tombstone gravely, "I can see that yuh ain't never made no study of occult science."

"Let's go eat that breakfast we missed," suggested Speedy.

THE whole town was excited—except Tombstone and Speedy. They went back to the dining room. Uncle Bob, the hotelkeeper, had a telegram for them. It was from Jim Keaton, and read:

IGNORE TELEGRAM AND REFER TO LETTER. SHERIFF WIRES THAT KILLER OF BANKER JAILED SEVERAL DAYS AGO. DO I HAVE TO COME DOWN THERE TO EXPLAIN THAT THE CASE IS SETTLED.

Speedy read it aloud to Tombstone, who tucked a napkin under his chin and looked amazed.

"That shore beats the bugs a-fightin'," he declared.

"What does?" asked Speedy.

"To think that he knows it already, and it jist happened. How on earth could he hear of it that quick?"

Speedy looked wearily at his long-faced partner, picked up a piece of toast and reached for the butter.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," muttered Tombstone, "I bet he really is."

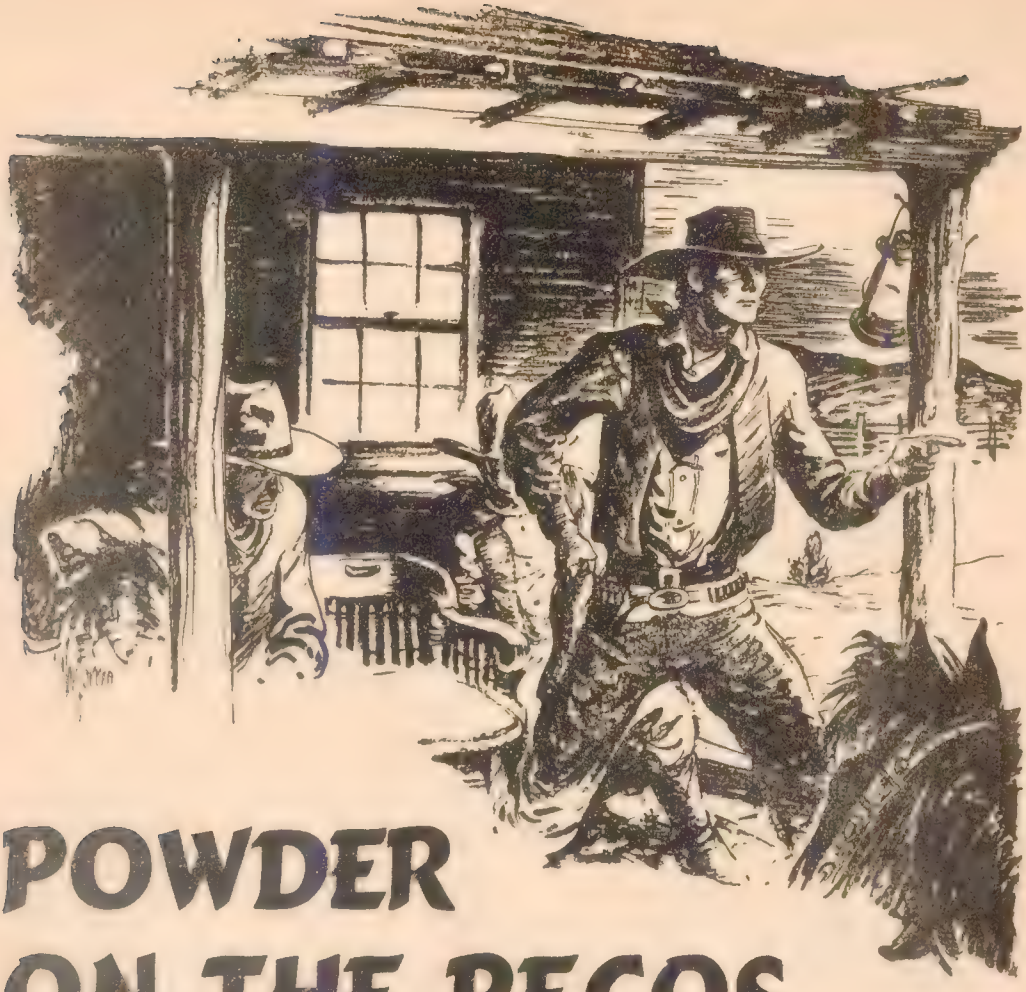
"Really is what?" asked Speedy.

"Occult, too," replied Tombstone.

•

Next Issue: WHEN THE JOKER WENT WILD by W. C. TUTTLE!

Carhartt's
FOR OVER 50 YEARS A FRIEND TO ORGANIZED LABOR
When work clothes stand up for you, you should stand up for them. And when one family of overall makers has backed the cause of Union Labor so generously and whole heartedly for so many years—even contributed considerable money—you, as an American Labor Union member, should back those who helped you.
Three generations of the Carhartt family have supported Labor Unions. They have proved by example in their own mills and shops that the Union label can be the badge of finer workmanship and sounder values. Insist on union made Carhartt Overalls. They're better built for longer wear.
MAKERS OF
Blue Denim, Brown Duck, White Sailcloth Overalls, Dungarees, Washable Work Caps
HAMILTON CARHARTT OVERALL COMPANY
Established 1889
Detroit Atlanta Dallas Carhartt Park, Irvine, Ky
Carhartt
UNION MADE
OVERALLS



POWDER ON THE PECOS

CHAPTER I

Big Stakes

RIDGE SAMPSON might not have seen it if he had not been expecting trouble, watching for it, as the stage rolled toward Yellow Rock. Ridge was a passenger that day, along with a couple of traveling salesmen who were new to this Texas range country and who had been talking their heads off all morning, asking Ridge questions about everything under the sun.

Ridge was sitting on the right, next the window, and when the big, six-horse vehicle made a right-hand turn onto a narrow upgrade he saw something that jerked every nerve in his tall body into instant alertness. It was the glint of steel on the steep, brush-covered slope that flanked the road ahead—steel where lawful steel had no business to be.

There was no time to warn the driver, no time for anything except swiftly to thrust his packed billfold into the space between the cushion and the back of the seat.

"Trouble comin', gents," he said. "Do just like they tell you."

And then from outside came a stentorian shout, "Hold it!" and the stage lurched heavily as the driver hauled

Newcomer Ridge Simpson Meets Trouble Head-On

A Complete Novelet by HAL WHITE

"I'd hate to pull steel on you," Ridge told them, "but law or no law, not you nor anybody is goin' to take me to that jail"

back on the reins. Dust boiled up as the brakes ground on the wheels and the stage jerked to a halt.

The shotgun guard, up on the box, must have made his play then, for, through the opened windows, Ridge heard him growl an oath, and then there was the crash of a shot. But it was a six-gun, not the guard's gun, and the brave but foolish fellow on the box tumbled off his high seat and hit the ground with a nasty thud. His shotgun fell with him, and when it struck the road it went off. The charge of buckshot glanced from a rock and went singing off into space.

A great cloud of dust rose around the figure in the road, but it did not move, and neither, for a moment, did anything or anybody else. Only the horses danced with nervous terror, and Sam Hoskins, the driver, sought to quiet them with soft words. Ridge could hear him, and old Sam was almost crying. He and Bob Wilkerson, the guard, had been riding together for five years.

RIDGE was wearing his iron, and he would certainly have risked using it then if he had been sure of the setup. But he had seen steel up there in the brush, he did not know yet how many

When He Tangles With Rustlers at Yellow Rock!

men were against them—and he had to think of the two pilgrims, who would probably get what the innocent bystander nearly always got if lead began to fly.

And then a masked man spurred alongside the coach, six-gun covering the passengers.

"Come out with your hands high!"

"Do like he says," Ridge cautioned his two companions, but the warning was unnecessary. Glancing at them, he saw that their eyes were bulging, the sweat of terror channeling the dust on their faces.

The three men got out, arms held above their heads.

One of the pilgrims nearly fell as he stepped to the road.

"Oh, lord—oh, my lord, we'll be killed," he kept moaning.

The other, a chubby, middle-aged man, must have seen his own fear reflected in this pitiful exhibition and been ashamed of it, for suddenly he stiffened, and his jaw tightened.

"Oh, shut up!" he commanded. "You make me sick."

Ridge grinned a little at that, in spite of himself.

"Easy, brother," he cautioned. "Easy does it."

And then they were standing in the dusty road beside the coach, and the young rancher's keen eyes were taking in everything at once, sizing up the situation.

It didn't look so good at first, but it looked better almost immediately. There were two horsemen, the one covering Ridge and the two salesmen, the other a little forward, dividing his attention between the driver, of whom he seemed wary, and the passengers.

Ridge looked at the two bandits, and at the leveled rifle sticking out of the brush, and a small smile grew inside him. But it did not show on his mouth, and his eyes were scornful, his excalmation angry, as he glanced at the moaning man beside him.

"You don't have to make that noise, friend," he drawled, and then, as though disgusted with the nearness of such a fellow, he side-stepped away from the two pilgrims. The bandits did not spot the ruse, or else they felt too sure of themselves to care.

The nearer one jerked his left thumb over his shoulder, and above the handkerchief mask his gaze was coldly on Ridge.

"Yuh see that rifle, hombre?"

Ridge nodded. "I see it."

"Jest callin' your attention to it, less'n yuh might get the idea you could handle the two of us. Don't try it or you'll go where the guard did."

"Let's git to it, Birch," the second rider said uneasily. "Somebody might come along."

"Yeah." The horses of both men, taking the contagion from the nervous stage animals, were jittery and on edge, hard to hold. "You stay in the saddle, Dobson, keep 'em covered—but don't get between them and Ross, up there on the hill—case they get the funny notion to start somethin'." He looked at Ridge. "That means you very special, mister."

Ridge grinned ruefully. "I know when I'm well off, feller. Go ahead and do what you come for, and let's have it over with."

"I'll just take that there roll of yours," growled the one called Birch. He began to dismount.

But he never finished the operation. Ridge had the toe of his boot nudged under a small rock in the dust, and now he swung his leg swiftly.

THE rock hit Birch's horse in the chest, and the animal, already ready to explode with nervousness, promptly broke in two. He went straight into the air, and Birch, half in and half out of the saddle, hit the dirt sprawling. With wildcat speed, he was up on his elbow, leveling at Ridge, but Ridge wasn't where he had been. He had widened the gap between himself and the pilgrims and put Birch's horse between himself and the other rider. His .45 bucked against his palm, once and yet again, and Birch's body seemed to melt into the dust of the road.

With the roar of the shots, Birch's horse leaped away from the slack body of his master, and Ridge was looking into the muzzle of Dobson's gun. That muzzle belched flame and noise, and the slug nicked the lobe of Ridge's ear. Then Ridge's gun crashed, and it was the last sound Dobson heard in this world.

He was a big man, and he toppled from his horse all in one motion, like a tree falling.

Ridge paused only long enough to

assure himself that Dobson was dead, and Birch beyond any further action. He gathered their guns, tossed them in the stage, then went around to the other side and knelt beside Bob Wilkerson.

"Is he—?"

Hoskins was peering down from the box.

"He's dead, Sam," Ridge said softly, and got to his feet. "Just a minute, I'll be back and put him in the stage. I gotta make that Birch feller talk—if I can."

He crossed again to the other side, knelt and turned the stricken bandit gently on his back. The man was shot through the chest and there was no doubt he was dying. The handkerchief mask had slipped from his face, but it was a face that Ridge did not know. The man's eyes flamed hate as he stared up at Ridge Sampson, and his lips cursed the rancher weakly.

"Don't waste your breath, amigo," Ridge said gently. "You haven't got much of it left, you know."

"I know," came the whisper. "Fine finish for a gent that never—"

"Never what?"

"Never—failed on a job—before."

"Your gun was for hire, wasn't it, Birch?"

"Like to know, wouldn't yuh?"

"You weren't doin' this on your own, Birch. Somebody was paying you. Who was it? Man, you're dyin'. Wipe the slate and go clean. Who was payin' you?"

The head of the dying man moved from side to side, his eyes roved, then came back to look straight into Ridge's steady gaze.

"Why should I protect that hydrophobia skunk? Cal Cantrell, that's who!"

Ridge took a deep breath.

"I thought so."

"He said you had a big wad of dough on you—sold your trail herd. We was to—get it away from you."

"You didn't have to shoot the guard, did you, Birch?"

"Dobson—he's too quick on the trigger."

"He won't be any more," Ridge said grimly. "Tell me, Birch—that ain't your real name, of course, but it'll do—what's Cab Cantrell got up his sleeve? What's he aimin' at, anyhow?"

The dying man was breathing hoarsely now, and he spoke with difficulty.

"Cantrell's—playin'—for big stakes—he figgers to—to—"

And that was all. Birch was gone. And with him had gone information that Ridge Sampson would almost have given his roll to possess.

The stage horses were quiet now, and Sam Hoskins got down to help Ridge and the others get the three bodies into the stage. Silent tears rolled down the old driver's grizzled cheeks as he smoothed the hair of the boy who had been almost like a son to him.

"If there was somebody behind them fellers," he said to Ridge, "jest let me get my hands on him. They could've been hired gunnies, Ridge, them two. That one tell yuh anything much?"

"He couldn't talk much, Sam," Ridge said. "He was too near gone."

He didn't want, yet, to tell Sam or anyone what Birch had said. Later would be time enough for the showdown, the showdown between himself and Cab Cantrell, which, when it came, would shake Yellow Rock county like an earthquake. For Cantrell, owner of the big Open A on a Rail ranch, wasn't goading smaller ranchers just because he didn't like the color of their eyes or the shape of their noses. Cantrell was big physically, and he was plenty big in a business way. He ran a huge outfit and he employed a lot of riders the year round—a tough crowd rodded by Jess Reeder, his foreman, who had plenty of say-so out at the Open A.

The stage went on pretty soon. The hat and rifle planted up in the brush hadn't told Ridge anything new as to their ownership, and Hoskins' comment had been brief.

"Sorta spotted them things for phonies, myself, Ridge, but that front feller on the ground had me dead to rights."

"I know," Ridge nodded, and tossed the stuff into the stage. Then, with the two horses of the bandits tied behind, with three dead men and three live ones in the coach, the lumbering vehicle resumed its journey to Yellow Rock, two miles away.

CHAPTER II

Trigger Talk

QUITE a crowd was waiting in front of the Travelers Hotel when they got there, for the word had gone round

that the stage was late, and that was a rare thing for Sam Hoskins, and usually meant trouble.

Ridge was in his store clothes, pants and a clean blue shirt, but with his coat off because he always shucked it as soon as he could. He had been all the way to Omaha with his stock, just for a little vacation, leaving the running of the ranch to his two punchers and Sing Lee, the Chinese cook.

When he got out of the stage, with the gun riding his hip, one of his riders, Joe Terrett, sung out "Hello, Ridge," but in the same moment several voices shot a question at Sam Hoskin, on the box.

"Where's Bob?"

Sam Hoskins, his lined old face working strangely, motioned with his hand toward the interior of the stage, then he got slowly down from his perch, and went to help Ridge with the bodies.

Others came forward to help, too. Bob's body was first out, and a gasp went up, then an angry growl from a score of throats.

"Who done this?"

Ridge straightened. "The feller that did it," he said quietly, "can't answer for himself, I reckon, but we can show him to you."

They brought out the body of Dobson, laid it on the plank sidewalk beside Wilkerson. Then Birch was lifted out.

"Them two," said Sam Hoskins grimly, "held us up at Settler's Gap. One of 'em shot Bob. Then Ridge got 'em both."

"But the stage wasn't carryin' no gold nor nothing today, was she?" A bearded bystander asked the question. "What was they after?"

"They were after me," Ridge Sampson said coldly. "And just mebbe there's some folks hereabouts could say why and how come."

The bearded fellow, Mark Jones, who ran the saddle shop, spoke up again.

"Seems like I seen them fellers around town, few days ago. Ain't they Cab Cantrell's men?"

"They sure are." That was Ben Hodge, another of Ridge's punchers, who had come up to stand with Joe Terrett and Ridge, if anything started. "I seen 'em myself. How about it, gents?" He turned to the crowd.

Another general growl that might have meant anything, and then someone said, "Here comes Cab now. Let's see what he says."

All eyes turned toward the burly, heavy-set man coming from the direction of the Hitching Post saloon along the sidewalk. Three men were with him, two of them his punchers and the third, Jess Reeder, his foreman.

So deep a silence descended on the crowd that the footfalls of the quartet on the boards were plainly to be heard. Ridge touched the butt of his gun with light fingers, assuring himself it was sliding easily in the holster. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ben and Joe do the same.

"Don't let's have no trouble, Ridge." Jones, the saddler, spoke uneasily.

"Set your mind at rest," Ridge said calmly. "This is no place for shootin'—less'n they start it."

And then the four men, lanky, shambling Jess Reeder walking beside his boss, were close, and Cab Cantrell was speaking.

"What's going on here?"

"They're your men," Sam Hoskins said fiercely. "They killed Bob here. Cantrell, if I thought you knowed anything about this, I'd get you for it if it was the last thing I ever did." Reeder sneered at that, and Hoskins turned on him. "And you, too, Reeder."

The Open A men were staring down at the dead faces on the walk, and Ridge, watching closely, saw the eyes of Cab Cantrell and Jess Reeder narrow, saw the quick look that passed between them.

"Who shot 'em?" Cantrell demanded harshly. "You, Sampson?"

"Yeah, me." Ridge stood easily, booted feet a little apart, hands hanging quietly at his sides. But there was a panther alertness in the pose that somehow stopped the savage words on Cab Cantrell's lips. The big Open A boss looked at his foreman.

"I asked you last week to take on some new riders, Jess—but I didn't say gunnies."

"Feller can't always tell, Cab." Reeder shrugged bony shoulders. "They looked all right, talked all right. I figgered they was good boys."

"Good—for what?" broke in Joe Terrett, his hand close to his gun.

THE sharp, electric tension in the air heightened at that. Some of the bystanders sifted away, getting out of the line of fire.

The crowd thinned to a few nervy

souls determined to be in on the finish.

"Keep out of this, Joe," warned Ridge in low tones. But he was glad the crowd had thinned, for he sensed trouble coming, and coming fast.

Jess Reeder—he had a reputation as one of the fastest gun hands in Yellow Rock County—answered Joe Terrett's question with one of his own.

"Good—just mebbe—for the purposes of the Star-in-a-Box, in case you'd got to 'em first, huh, Sampson? Lemme ask—Did you stick around the slaughter house in Omaha long enough to see the reverse side of any of them brands your stock was wearin'?"

Ridge felt cold, terrible anger surge inside him. It wasn't the first time he had been charged, by hint or direct accusation, with doctoring brands, swinging a wide loop to add to his Star-in-a-Box herd. And it wouldn't be the last, unless he could find out who was running stock off the adjoining ranches, including the Open A, and making the evidence—of sign and such—point to him.

"That's telling him, Jess!" The shout came from a peppery little fellow who had stood his ground over near the steps of the hotel, and who now added his own accusation to Jess Reeder's. The thing that hurt was that the little fellow, Roy Wilson, was an honest rancher and that he was expressing the opinion of a lot of other honest people thereabouts.

For a while there was no sound, there on the main street of Yellow Rock. Hardly anyone was in sight but the four Open A men, the three Star-in-a-Box boys, and Wilson, gnawing his mustache and waiting for the ruckus to begin. No sound, but tension screamed in the very air as the two groups faced each other, and Ridge Sampson held an iron hand on his own urge to draw steel and start shooting. When he spoke, it was first to Cab Cantrell.

"Cantrell," he said, "for more'n a year now you been tryin' to buy me out."

"Offered you twice what that there jungle of rocks and bushbrush is worth, too," Cantrell said.

"What it's worth for grazing, mebbe," Ridge nodded. "Could be you got some other reason for wantin' it—for wantin' to get rid of me."

"I had my reasons," Cantrell growled. "Still have. What they are is none of your danged business."

"When I wouldn't sell any other way, you figgered to take my season's earnings, leave me without cash for the winter. Rob—or kill. Your orders, Cantrell. An' that, hombre, is some of my danged business. Plenty!"

"You lie in your teeth, Sampson!"

"Yeah? The feller called Birch talked before he died. But he did die. You hadn't figgered on that, I reckon. Got your next move schemed out, Cantrell? I'll be waiting."

Jess Reeder spoke up before Cantrell could answer.

"Big talk, seems like—from a brand doctor."

Reeder's hand was close to his holster as he spoke, but it might better have been covering his chin, for that was the target of Ridge Sampson's driving knuckles. It sounded like a meat cleaver, and the Open A foreman sprawled his gangling length on the walk.

The hand of one of the Open A punchers flashed to his belt, came up holding steel, but not for long. The gun spun out of his grip, and he swore savagely, nursing numbed fingers.

Ridge held his gun level, a small trickle of smoke lifting and curling in the quiet air.

"Anyone else?"

But none of the others had drawn. The action had been far too fast for Cab Cantrell, who was good enough but not that good. His two men had followed his lead, holding their fire, and Ridge's men, on their toes for anything, were waiting.

Reeder was down for the count, but he was a tough bird, and when he came out of it, and was helped to his feet by one of his mates, his eyes glared hatred at Ridge.

Ridge reholstered his gun, dropped his hands to his sides.

"I'm waitin', Reeder in case you think you can cut it."

Reeder didn't. "There'll be a time," he snarled. "This here business is just good and started, and it ain't gonna be you that finishes it."

"Shut up, Jess." Cantrell's eyes on his unlucky foreman were bitter. "He outclassed you. See that it don't happen again. Come on, boys, that's all for now." He and his men turned, headed back for the saloon.

Ridge and his boys left quietly, and Ridge said, "I'll just take this here cash to the bank, boys. Be right with you."

OLD Kent Rosson, the cashier, accepted the cash at his window, but his manner was cold, uncordial. Ridge felt his heart heavy with the knowledge that honest men like Rosson, and Wilson, the rancher, and a lot of others had him pegged as a night rider and a brand doctor.

He had to admit to himself that they had reason. Trouble had begun in Yellow Rock County more than a year earlier, just about the time that Ridge had lost a valuable trail herd in a stampede over a cutbank. Shortly after that, the long-looping and rustling had begun—and the worst of it was that whoever was doing it always planted sign leading to Ridge's ranch.

And right there the sign was lost, because, as Cantrell had said, the Star-in-a-Box spread was an area of rough country, in sharp contrast to the level or rolling rangeland that lay on all sides.

It had been one reason the price was low when Ridge bought it—because it looked so rough and impossible. When the rustlers ran stolen stock into that kind of country, the owners might as well look for a needle in a haystack as to search for them.

Ridge picked up Ben and Joe, and the three rode down the dusty main drag, heading home. A group had gathered again on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, and the three bodies had been removed to the office of the town's doctor-coroner. The group fell silent as the three riders passed, and eyes stared coldly.

"The hell with them!" muttered Joe Terrett. "Time's comin' when they'll be down on their hambones apologizin', Ridge."

"Mebbe." Ridge touched spurs to the bay gelding and they left the hostile town behind them.

The buildings of the Star-in-a-Box spread were some five miles west of the town of Yellow Rock, on the eastern edge of Ridge's property. His territory ran southward in a long, narrow strip almost to the Rio Grande River on the Mexican border.

An arm of the Open A ranch, with its uncounted thousands of acres of rich grazing land, touched Ridge's land on the north, and Cantrell's home place was only some three miles from Ridge's buildings.

"What you figger Cantrell is tryin' to do, Ridge?" Joe Terrett asked as they rode.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Joe." Ridge got out tobacco and papers and fashioned himself a cigarette as they loped along. "He could figger there's gold somewhere on my land—several old mine shafts about, y'know."

"Water, too," said Ben Hodge. "You got springs that never go dry. He depends on the creek comin' in from the west. If that goes dry, he's sunk. If he had the Star-in-a-Box he'd never lack for water, no matter what."

"There's another thing," Ridge said, "and I think I'd put my money on it if I was bettin'. Might, be, of course, that he's runnin' stock onto my spread just to get me in bad with the ranchers, thinkin' when he can't buy me out, mebbe he can run me out, or get me strung up. He might, too, one o' these fine nights."

"Not if we see them first," clipped Joe Terrett.

"But what I figger," Ridge went on, "is that Cantrell—with Jess Reeder doin' his dirty work, naturally—is doing what he is blaming me for. There's a thousand little pocket valleys on the Star-in-a-Box, an' you could keep stock there long as you needed to get a herd, and to work over the brands. Then shove 'em down across the Border, using the rough country for a screen all the way. That—"

HE BROKE off suddenly as a rifle bullet cut the air, only inches in front of his face. It cracked like a whip as it passed, and close upon the sound came the flat spang of the distant, hidden rifle.

"Git going!" Ridge shouted, and put his horse to a dead gallop, the others close behind. Another bullet cut behind them, and a third tugged at the cloth of the bandanna that snapped in the wind on Ben Hodge's neck. There were no more shots, but Ridge, staring ahead, gave a sudden exclamation.

"Boys, ain't that smoke due west of us?"

"Sure is."

"Looks mighty like our place."

"Cantrell ain't wastin' no time," Ridge said bitterly, and urged his mount to new speed. "Sing Lee's there alone," he went on, the wind snatching the words from his lips.

Suspicion became certainty as they drew near the ranch. A towering cloud

of smoke, with flame at its base, rose into the afternoon air, and soon they could hear the crackle and roar of the fire.

But it wasn't the house, and it wasn't the barn. It was something more important than either, the haystacks on which Ridge would almost surely have to depend for at least part of his winter feed.

And hay was scarce, hard to get.

But the buildings were in danger, for all that. The wind was toward them, and the raiders must have thought that firing the stacks would do the whole job. And it would have if Ridge and his men had been a minute later than they were. Already tiny tendrils of flame were beginning to show on the roofs of house and barn, and the three went into action in a hurry.

With water from the trough at the windmill, and the mill turning at full speed to pump more, they wet down the threatened roofs, kept at it until the flames from the haystacks had died down and the danger was over.

Then Ridge drew his shirtsleeve wearily across his sweating, soot-smeared face and suddenly remembered something. He asked:

"Where's Sing Lee?"

The three men looked at each other in consternation.

They had been so desperately busy they had forgotten the smiling little Chinese who presided so capably over the ranch kitchen.

Ridge rushed into the kitchen, the others on his heels.

Sing Lee lay under an opened window on the side facing the barn and haystacks. The room was full of smoke that had drifted through that window, but it must have been full of powder fumes not so long before, for a rifle lay on the floor, and empty shells were scattered about. In the midst of it, his dead hand still gripping the rifle, lay Sing Lee.

"Here's why they didn't touch off the house and the barn," Ridge said. And then, his hand on the thin shoulder in its clean white blouse, "You done a job, Sing. We ain't forgettin'."

They buried the brave little Chinese under a cluster of cottonwoods, not far from the house. Later, Ridge got supper, but none of the three could eat. They tried briefly to swallow past the lumps in their throats, and then, one by one, got up and left the table.

CHAPTER III

Hot Iron

THE sun was touching the hills to the west when Ridge and his men held a council of war on the porch.

"They'll be back, most likely," Ridge said. "We got to cut some more loopholes in these walls, be ready for 'em. That is—listen, boys, there is no law says you have to stick. This here's my fight, and—"

"It's ours, too," Joe Terrett said curtly, and Ben Hodge's deep voice rumbled approval.

"Sure appreciate that," Ridge said.

"The moon'll be late tonight," Terrett speculated. "Kinda dark till she comes. Tomorrow, if they don't show up tonight, me and Ben can go over west of here and pick up a lot of pitch pine—for torches outside."

"Yeah," Ben agreed. "Good idea. Let's git at them loopholes."

They took turns sleeping that night, one man always on guard, but the enemy was taking his time. Nothing showed up, and the morning dawned bright and peaceful.

After breakfast, Joe and Ben saddled up to go after the pine knots.

"Keep an eye out for sign," Ridge advised. "Might turn up something when we least expect it.

"Sure will, Ridge." The two rode away at a lope. Ridge got his rifle and took up a position on a slope where the brush hid him and he could see all around.

But the morning passed without incident, except that as the sun swung higher and the two men did not return, Ridge began to feel faint disquiet. They might have been drygulched, met up with superior numbers of the Open A men somewhere.

Just before noon, Joe and Ben rode in, loaded down with pitchy pine knots.

"Harder to find than we figgered," Joe said. "But we got 'em."

"And jest let any of them jaspers try to rush us, with a flock of them torches planted in the yard," Ben grinned.

After dinner, Ridge saddled his bay gelding.

"You fellers hold the fort," he directed. "I'm going to have me a look-see."

"Alone?"

"Why not?"

The two men exchanged worried glances, and Joe Terrett spoke his objection.

"Ridge, that's mighty risky business, seems like. Those hombres are playin' for keeps."

"So am I," Ridge said grimly, and rode away.

He rode west and a little north, keeping in the rocky area but skirting close to the rolling land of the adjoining Cantrell holdings. Here and there he saw his own cattle, grazing in grass pockets among the hills.

He rode all afternoon, in and out and around, to the west, then to the south, then east again. It was hard going, but he had a good horse under him, and he spared neither himself nor the animal.

And then, in late afternoon, he topped a low crest of ground, and in a shallow, brush-rimmed bowl below him saw two men beside a branding fire. They had a young steer down, securely tied, and one of them was hunkered over the flank, smoke rising thinly as he worked with his iron.

Their horses waited nearby.

The standing man spotted Ridge at once, and both men spun to face him, hands close to leather. The lean young rancher knew the risk he was taking, but he rode straight toward them, holding his horse to a steady, quiet walk, eyes watching those hovering gunhands.

They stood there and let him come up. They made no move, just waited, sneers on their faces, for Ridge to take the lead. Ridge sat his saddle calmly, narrowed gray eyes taking in the scene. He knew the two men. They were Open A rannies, named Dixon and Wetherby.

"Kinda far off your own range, ain't you, boys?" Ridge, his hands resting easily on the saddlehorn, put the question softly.

"Mebbe." Dixon, who had been doing the branding, spoke tauntingly. "Mebbe we got business here."

"And," Wetherby put in, "mebbe it's our business, and not yours."

Ridge looked at the running iron which Dixon had dropped as he sprang up. It had set up a small smolder of smoke in the dry grass where it lay.

"When a man uses one of those things," said Ridge, "it's everybody's business." In one lithe, swift motion he was off his horse. "I'll just have a look at that brand, gents, if it's all the same to you."

"It ain't," said the sharp-faced Dixon, and planted himself squarely between Ridge and the prostrate steer.

"I said I'd see that brand," Ridge repeated. "Reckon you heard me."

SECONDS stretched out while the three men stood there, an arms-length apart, and Ridge heard Wetherby breathing heavily through his nose. Then Weatherby spoke.

"What the hell, Ned. Let him see it. He can't do nothin'. His word against ours, and his ain't worth a whistle in a windstorm."

"Guess you're right." Dixon sounded relieved, and he stepped quickly to one side. "Have a look, Sampson."

Ridge looked. What he saw was his own Star-in-a-Box, crude, but easily recognizable. What it had been before Dixon put the running iron on it was still evident, for Dixon had not quite finished his work. The earlier brand had been the Open A on a Rail. This was a Cantrell animal.

Ridge's gun was in his hand so fast that the two men could only blink, and stare at the shining steel.

"Let him up," he commanded, and Wetherby, squat and heavy-set, bent to release the bawling animal. The steer tore away, snorting and tossing his head, and Ridge stood a moment, eyeing his two prisoners and thinking. The day was far spent, and he might be needed, badly needed, at the ranch before he could take these two into town, turn them over to Sheriff Edmonds and get back home.

"Mount," he ordered, "and ride. Sheriff will be out tomorrow with warrants for you both. If you ain't there, it'll sure be proof you're guilty."

Dixon spoke as the two of them swung into leather.

"Figger you can make it stick, Sampson? We'll sure be waitin' to see."

His jeering laugh rang out as they rode away. Ridge reholstered his gun, had one foot in the stirrup when out of the corner of his eye he saw Wetherby twist in his saddle and go for his iron. The two renegades were perhaps thirty

yards away, their horses at an easy lope.

Ridge's upraised foot hit ground and his hand flashed to his holster. Wetherby's slug raked the saddle cantle, and howled its disappointment in thin air. Ridge's bullet hit flesh. Wetherby reeled in his saddle, but grabbed leather and hung on. Dixon closed in beside him, half supporting him, and the two disappeared over the crest.

Ridge remembered the fire, stamped it out, picked up the forgotten running iron and rode homeward. He figured he had the thing straight now. Cantrell and Reeder and the tough gang of Open A rannies were stealing cattle and running them over the Border.

They were stealing from all the ranchers roundabout, but now and then they included an animal wearing the Open A brand. They were gathering the stuff in some hidden valley, and rebranding.

If the honest ranchers discovered the gathered steers before they were moved south, suspicion would point to Ridge Sampson. Reeder had more or less given away the scheme in town, with his jeer about looking at the reverse side of the Star-in-a-Box hides when the animals were slaughtered. For, no matter how convincing the running iron made it look on the outside, the inside would still show the original brand. It was a clever scheme, and—so far—Cantrell and Reeder sure had things their own way.

When Ridge unsaddled at home, he noticed the running iron he had tied to the cantle, and he unstrapped it, tossed it on a feedbox in the barn. When he went to town in the morning, he'd take it with him, show it to Sheriff Dan Edmonds. That is, if he went to town. For he was beginning bitterly to realize that he had not one shred of real evidence on which to ask for the arrest of Dixon and Wetherby.

At supper, he told Joe and Ben about it, and they agreed that he'd have to have more evidence.

The sun was still well up when they finished eating and went to the porch for a smoke.

Ridge had built his cigarette, had it in his mouth, the match lighted, when he paused with the flame halfway to its tip. He spoke quietly.

"Here comes the showdown, boys." He lighted the cigarette, flipped the match, blew smoke. The eyes of all three men were on the quartet of riders drumming swiftly toward them on the road to the east.

"Cantrell," said Ridge, recognizing the burly figure of the range boss, "and Reeder." He inhaled smoke and in him was a sense of relief that the long suspense was over and action was coming.

BUT was it? As the four men rode into the yard, Ridge recognized the other two. One of them was Roy Wilson, and the other was Sheriff Dan Edmonds! The law!

"Take it slow and easy, boys," Ridge warned in low tones. And then, as the lean old lawman and his companions drew rein near the porch, "Howdy, Dan. You got business with me?"

"Reckon I have, Ridge." The sheriff slapped his shirt pocket with his left hand. "Got a warrant here for your arrest."

"On what charges, Dan?"

"Cattle stealin', brand doctorin', and—I sure hate this, Ridge, but I got no choice."

"And what, Sheriff?"

"Murder."

"Murder!"

"Yeah, murder!" Jess Reeder snarled. "Wetherby died two hours ago—shot by you in cold blood when him and Dixon come on you doctorin' a Open A brand."

"And just this mornin'," Roy Wilson put in savagely, "some of my men come on seven of my steers bunched in a draw on your land—waitin' for your runnin' iron, doubtless."

"We're doin' you a favor you don't deserve," Cab Cantrell growled. "Letting the law take you, give you a trial."

"We wouldn't have, if it was my say-so," Reeder protested. "You'd have been doin' a cottonwood dance before now."

"Sure would," Wilson added. "Sheriff, you mind if I look around while you're talkin'. Might just find a vented hide, or somethin'."

"Go ahead, Roy," the sheriff said. Well, Ridge, I reckon that's the story. So now—"

"Dixon's story, and Wetherby's!" Ridge cut in. "Two to my one. Cantrell on the warrant. And that stage holdup, Dan—don't that tell you somethin'? Those were Cantrell's men. He admitted it."

"But not my orders or by my knowledge," the big range boss said, his eyes savage.

"Everything will be taken into account at the trial," Edmonds said. "No good gettin' boogery, Ridge. If you're innocent—"

"Yeah, innocent!" The shrill interruption came from Roy Wilson. "Look at what I found in the barn!" He was brandishing the running iron.

"That ties it," Cab Cantrell said between his teeth. "Dan, do your stuff."

"Get your horse, Ridge," the sheriff ordered. "Let's be movin'."

"You be movin'," Ridge said. "You and your polecat friends. I've got nothing against you, Dan, nor against Roy Wilson. But you know as well as I do that once you git me in jail my life ain't worth a plugged nickel."

"Then you're resistin' arrest? Is that how she stands?"

"Say refusing, Sheriff. Not resisting unless you force me. I'd hate to pull steel on you, Dan. But, law or no law, not you nor anybody is gonna take me to that jail."

The sheriff scratched his lean jaw and thought a moment. Dan Edmonds was no coward, but he was no fool, either, and he realized that Ridge Sampson meant what he said, and that the two men with him would back him all the way.

"If you ain't man enough for this job, Sheriff," sneered Jess Reeder, "stand aside and we'll do it for you."

RIDGE looked full into the hate-filled eyes of the gangling foreman.

"That's just fine, Reeder," he said softly. "Start drawin'—anytime."

The old sheriff turned hotly on his companions.

"You fellers asked to come along, but you ain't deputized, an' you keep your danged noses out. You start anything, Jess—or any of you—an' it'll be my pleasure to throw you in jail. In case there's anything left to throw when the smoke clears."

He turned to Ridge. "I'll be back, son. My duty, not my pleasure. Meanwhile, think 'er over. And if you got any ideas of hightailin', I'm warning you I'll foller till the ice freezes out the fires in the hot place."

"I'll be waiting," Ridge promised. "And when you come, Dan, or any of you, come a-shootin'."

"Your goose is cooked plenty," Cab Cantrell growled. "C'mon, Sheriff. Let's go!" The four spurred away.

CHAPTER IV

The Big Herd

FOR some time after the visitors had disappeared over the hill, no one spoke on the porch.

"We got three rifles," said Ben Hodge.

"And four, five short-guns," said Joe Terrett. "Not to mention a shotgun, and and plenty of shells for all of 'em."

"It ain't your fight," Ridge began.

"Shut up. Let's be placin' some of those pine torches, ready to light when she gets dark," said Ben Hodge.

"Comin', Ridge?" said Joe Terrett.

Night came. The flares burned smokily, lighting the whole area around house and barn with a reddish, flickering glow. Inside the house, the barricaded men waited for the attack, but it was slow in coming. Time dragged painfully. Then Ben Hodge spoke sharply from his loophole position at the rear of the house.

"Here comes somebody—on the jump."

Ridge and Joe rushed to look. A horse was tearing down the slope behind the house, slipping, sliding, rushing straight toward the leveled guns inside. As the animal came close, his rider raised his empty hands high, called out his plea.

"Don't shoot, fellers. Lemme in."

Guiding the plunging horse with his foot, both hands up, the man veered the animal past the house, and around to the front. There he stopped, swung off, let the horse go.

"Who are you?" Ridge challenged through a loophole.

"Bill Carmody, of the Open A," came the answer. "Lemme in. I got to talk to you. Fast— 'fore some of 'em wing me!"

"Shuck your gunbelt and come on, carryin' it in your hand," Ridge commanded, and he opened the door.

The man came in, let his gunbelt drop on the floor. In the dim, wavering light of candles, they saw blood on his cheek, and his eyes were wild.

"I had to tell you," he gasped. "They got Cab Cantrell."

"Who got Cantrell?"

"Reeder and his gang."

"Reeder! Jess Reeder? What're you tryin' to pull?"

Carmody, red-headed and wiry, bristled at that.

"You see this on my cheek? It ain't a mosquito bite. Reeder's slug done that."

"Take it easy, Carmody," Ridge said. "Tell us."

"Well, while Cantrell and Reeder was over here this afternoon, I was alone in the bunkhouse. And last night I thought I saw him stick something under his mattress, so I looked."

"What did you find? If anything."

"Plenty! I found a little notebook full of figures on cattle sales acrost the Rio. How do I know that? 'Cause in the book was notes, in pencil, from some feller signin' himself 'Pancho'."

"So then what?"

"So then, when Cantrell came home, I gave him the stuff. Mebbe it seems funny, but it was the first he'd known what Reeder was doing. Cab really figgered you was at the bottom of it, Ridge. He really did."

"Well, what did Cantrell do?"

"Headed for town to notify the sheriff. Took me and one other feller along. We two was the only ones in the whole crowd that wasn't in with Jess. But Reeder got wise to what had happened, and him and his crowd caught up with us. There was shootin'."

"They get Cantrell?"

"Couldn't be sure. It was dark by then. But I think they wounded him. The three of us split up, each on his own, and I told Pete, that was the other puncher, to git to town if he could and tell Edmonds what was goin' on."

"If Pete got there," Ridge reflected, "the sheriff is prob'ly, by now, ridin' with a posse after Reeder."

"And Reeder," said Carmody grimly, "along with his whole crowd, is huntin' high and low for Cab Cantrell, 'cause if that book and the notes ever git into the hands of honest men it'd stretch Reeder's neck longer'n a rattlesnake.

"I done Cab Cantrell an injustice," Ridge said. "If there was any way to find him, and help him, now, I'd sure do it. But this here is a big country. Men could ride all night, and never come up with each other, nor anywhere near."

"He might be—" Ben Hodge began. "What's that? Another hoss comin', Ridge. Comin' hell-bent."

They all heard it then, the swift, blurring drum of hoofs on the hard ground, and almost instantly the animal came into the circle of light. It was Cab Cantrell, and when he pulled up in the yard, and dismounted, the exhausted horse staggered and nearly fell. So did Cantrell.

"Hello, the house," he shouted. "Ridge—Sampson."

"Come on in!" Ridge opened the door. "But shuck your gun first." Ridge was taking no chances that this might be a neat little game put up by Carmody and Cantrell to get him off guard.

BUT it wasn't. The big range boss obediently dropped his gunbelt, then came weaving into the room. He was coatless, and his left forearm was blood-soaked, though he had roughly bandaged it as he rode.

"Carmody!" he exclaimed. "You here? See anything of Pete?"

"I told him to git to town, to the sheriff, if he could."

"Good. You told Ridge what happened?"

"I sure did."

"Ridge, fella, I sure ain't proud they pulled the wool over my eyes like they done. I figgered from the jump-off it was you—offered to buy you out, figgerin' to get rid of you 'thout a range war. That Birch bandit—he lied."

"It'll all right, Cab," Ridge said. "What about Reeder?"

"That's mainly what I come to tell you," Cantrell said. "I circled, gave him and his bunch the slip. And it's funny what a man'll find when he ain't lookin' for it. Cuttin' across your land, I come on a pocket where some of Reeder's gang was holdin' mor'n a thousand head. Reeder rode in while I was hid, an', Ridge, they're movin' out tonight."

"Movin' out?"

"South across the Border. Reeder knows the game's up here. If he could have found me, got it back, he could've laughed at all of us, but not now."

"We've got to cut 'em off from the Border." Ridge sprang into instant action. "Let's get saddled, boys." He glanced from the window. "Your horse is standin', Carmody. You comin' along?"

"Am I comin' along!" the little Irishman sputtered. "You try and stop me!"

"You, Cantrell? Can you ride, with that slug through your arm."

"To get Jess Reeder," said Cab Cantrell grimly, "I could ride with a slug through my heart!"

"Atta boy, Cab!" Ridge laughed. "Let's go!"

They rode south and west under the stars, five men determined to halt Jess Reeder and his bandit crowd or die in the attempt. Somewhere down there the big herd would pass. It would not, probably, be too hard to tell where, for on a still night the trampling, bawling and horn-clashing of such a large herd would carry to ears some distance away —especially to ears that were listening for just that particular sound.

"There'll be at least fifteen of them fellers," Cantrell remarked as they loped along. "If we can get the jump on 'em, mebbe we can thin 'em some before they really get to shootin' back. That way we'll have a chance.

"I want Jess Reeder — myself — personal," Ridge said.

"You want him!" Big Cab Cantrell laughed. "Mister, not if I see him first —the danged sidewinder!"

Ridge chuckled in the dark. "There'll be meat for all of us, I reckon."

They rode for an hour, and the moon began to poke its yellow roundness above the eastern horizon. Another hour and it was well up, so bright that it threw the shadows of their hurrying horses ahead of them.

"That'll help a lot," said Cab Cantrell. "I always did kinda like to see what I was aimin' at."

They rode into a small draw, sheltered on the north by a brush-rimmed slope, and Ridge pulled up his horse.

"This is about the middle of the rough strip, east and west," he said. "Let's wait here a little, see if we can pick up any noise. Anyhow, we're in plenty of time for a smoke."

All five rolled and lighted cigarettes, though Ridge had to help the injured Cantrell with his. They smoked in silence, except for an occasional low word, and they sat in silence when they had finished, straining keen ears for the distant sound they wanted to hear.

An hour passed, and nothing broke the utter stillness except the far off bark of a coyote and, beside them, the horses champing their bits. Ridge got to his feet, the others watching him from their cross-legged positions on the ground.

"Let's patrol a little ways west. But we gotta stick together, not be scattered when the pinch comes."

They mounted and rode. And then, when they paused to listen, they heard it. Faintly, off to the northwest, the sounds of a moving herd.

"Come on!" Ridge put spurs to his horse, and the others followed. They came to a wide, rock-strewn ravine running north and south, and stopped again.

"They're dead north of us now," Joe Terrett muttered.

"This is the way they're coming," Cantrell said.

"Wait till we're sure," Ridge cautioned, and they sat their horses like statues under the moon, listening tensely. In a few minutes there could be no doubt. The herd would pass this way.

THE five dismounted in a sheltered draw, ground-hitched their horses. Each man had a rifle and a six-gun.

"Joe," Ridge said, "you and Ben and Carmody get yourselves good rock shelter on the west side of the gulch. Cab and me will do the same on this side. And stay put—otherwise we won't know who's friend and who's enemy when the ruckus gets goin'. Okay, gents?"

"Okay, Ridge," came the eager chorus from the three young fellows. Carmody looked wild, blood on his cheek, hair flying on his bare head, but in the bright moonglow his blue eyes snapped with the light of battle.

"Let's each of us," Ridge advised, "try to locate the others by the gun flashes before they take cover and start shootin'. Pick yourselves the biggest rocks you can find, boys. You're gonna need 'em, I reckon."

They were gone then, the three of them, running across the ravine, and one by one, as Ridge and Cantrell watched, their moving figures seemed to disappear into the ground, until nothing showed over there but rocks and brush.

"Before we pick our own spots, Ridge," the range boss said, "I just want you to know I figger to help you with any hay you might need this winter. And of course I don't need to tell you that burnin' your stacks wasn't any of my doings. I shoulda known Jess

Reeder was up to somethin'. A man can be mighty blind sometimes, seems like."

"Forget it, Cab." Ridge tapped the man's big chest with a friendly fist. "We all make mistakes. It's you and me now, to see who'll get Jess Reeder. And I don't wish you no luck on that."

Cantrell chortled. "Nor me you. Be seein' yuh."

They separated, each to take position behind a sheltering rock. And then there were more minutes of waiting—long minutes, for the herd was farther away than it had seemed. Ridge had time to feel the clean, dry sand under him and the rough, solid face of the rock that protected him; to hear the cry of a night bird, the renewed barking of coyotes, and to smell the good scent of sage on the light breeze. It was a great smell, the best in the world. Powder smoke was a good smell, too, when you were using it like tonight—defendin' your right to set straight in the saddle and look every danged man in the eye.

The noise of the nearing herd grew louder, horns clashing, hock joints cracking, steers raising their protesting voices to the star-filled sky. The shouts of men came, too, and every now and then the swift drum of hoofs as some beast decided to take off on his own, and a puncher spurred after him.

And then they were close, and the moon shone down on a packed mass of moving backs and tossing horns. Men rode at point, and on the flanks. Men brought up the drag. There were men everywhere, many more than were needed, even for so large a herd. Jess Reeder's evil band was indeed moving out.

Ridge crouched behind his rock and studied the situation through narrowed eyes. If he waited to let the lead animals come opposite, the whole herd might stampede on southward when the shooting began. He raised his rifle, took careful aim at the horseman riding point. That man was not Jess Reeder. Even at distance he could tell that.

The rifle flashed and the rocks slapped the echoes back at him. The rider lifted both hands as though imploring the moon. Then his horse reared, pawing the air, and the man slid limply over the flank.

Instantly four other rifles darted flame, and wild yells rang in the night as the renegades scattered. The cattle hesitated, began to mill somewhat, and the forward motion of the herd slowed. Then, up front, one big steer put his head down and charged straight ahead.

Ridge's second bullet caught him squarely, sent him somersaulting end over end, and others, about to follow his lead, became confused and started running in circles. That was all to the good, to halt a southward stampede.

The night was alive with the racket of firing, and with the darting shapes of Reeder men dismounting and running for cover or else rushing up the sides of the ravine with the apparent intention of taking the attackers from behind.

But one came spurring at top speed right down the middle of the gulch, bent low in leather, the wind of his motion laying the soft brim of his sombrero back against his forehead. Three rifles spoke at once, and the reckless bandit left his horse as though snatched by a giant hand.

The others didn't attempt that suicidal gauntlet. Most of them disappeared, but their guns went into action. Ridge heard bullets slap and go wheeing into space. He fired at a flash below, and two slugs came back at him instantly, one of them hissing overhead, the other kicking sand into his face.

He spat the gritty stuff from his mouth, and then, glancing across the ravine, saw a man appear on the rim over there, outlined for a moment against the starry sky. Then he was gone from sight, skulking, Indian fashion, down the slope to take Ridge's men from the rear. Ridge roared a warning.

"Watch behind you!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a six-gun blared. The skulker screamed, leaped convulsively to his feet, then fell, rolling down the slope. So much for him.

The firing was slackening now, each side holed up and waiting. Ridge knew that some of the Reeder gang had probably circled wide and were already on their way to Mexico, on the dead run. But others were staying, fighting it out. Those stabbing darts of flame proved it. Ridge hoped that Jess Reeder was one of them.

The answer to his hope came sooner than he had expected. He had warned

his boys to watch behind them, but forgotten, for the moment, to do the same himself. Now, in a lull in the firing, his ear caught the faint crackle of brush behind him, and he whirled about.

Lanky, gangling Jess Reeder was standing on the rim, outlined against the moonlight, his six-gun swinging up. Ridge did an instant somersault that matched the steer's below, and Reeder's hungry, whistling slug cut the air where he had been. And then Ridge was on his elbow, .45 fisted and jolting his forearm with recoil.

Three swift shots, right into the winking blobs of yellow flame coming from Reeder's gun. Reeder's bullets gouged earth and spanged rock, and a howling richochet burned Ridge's neck. But Reeder was going down. The gun dropped from his nerveless fingers, and he stood swaying. Then he seemed to fold up, in sections, like a carpenter's rule. Hands clutching at his stomach, he fell, and the brush swallowed him.

Cantrell called from his own rock nearby.

"Nice goin', Ridge."

"He must've recognized my voice when I yelled to the boys," Ridge called back.

And then there came a swift drumming of many hoofs and Sheriff Dan Edmonds was there, with a posse. The fighting flared again, briefly, but not for long. Those of the renegades not dead in their own blood got out in a hurry.

"We picked up your sign," Edmonds said. "Follered fast as we could. Figgered what had happened when we heard the cattle, and the shootin'."

Terrett and Hodge and Carmody, all unharmed, came running to join the group. Down in the ravine, the big herd stood uncertain, a sea of rolling eyes and tossing heads. But at the north end, some of the animals seemed to have turned about, were beginning a general movement that way.

The old sheriff grinned at Cantrell.

"I reckon, Cab, I can tear up this here warrant now, huh?"

Cab Cantrell grinned back at the lawman, and at Ridge, who was fingering the slight bullet burn on the neck.

"We'll bury the warrant with Jess Reeder," said the big range boss. "And forget 'em both."

The rustlers of Three Sleep Basin plan a big haul of steers—and a slick getaway—but they fail to reckon on the quick wit and ready guns of Navajo Tom Raine in RANGERS RIDE WITH DEATH, the exciting complete novelet by JACKSON COLE coming next issue!

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"

Without Painful Backache

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

Withers sent a wild shot after Cadder to urge him to utmost speed

Undercover Santa Claus

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Riding the sunset trails to Stony Ridge, Joe Withers risks the peril of a hangnoose to accomplish a mission dear to his heart!

IT WAS about an hour after sunset when Joe Withers cautiously left the cave in which he had established his hideout.

Now night had come, a night relieved only by the faint light of the stars and with the promise of only a thin new moon later. And Joe Withers was finding that the wind of late December had a sting in it as it swept down from the hills.

For several reasons, this was a journey that could not be hurried even to get out of the cold wind. Death might be waiting ahead for him, or be riding beside or behind him. Joe Withers dared not ride openly and at top speed to reach his destination, nor dare follow the well-

traveled trails. Probably he would meet nobody, but he dared not risk the chance.

Friendship for Hiram Bernham had called Joe Withers back to this section of the country. It had been more than a year since that day in the small town of Stony Ridge when, as the climax of a bitter quarrel, he had whipped his gun out of his holster and sent three bullets crashing into the body of Ed Sells, a wealthy ranchman. He had watched Ed Sells fall to the ground with blood gushing from his wounds, then had jumped into his saddle and used his spurs.

Sells was rich and popular and had great influence in the Stony Ridge district. Joe Withers had known that Sells' infuriated friends would use a rope on him without hesitation if they caught him, that they would not stop to consider that Sells had started to draw first.

He had traveled down into Mexico on the wings of fear with only his pony and gun and the few dollars he happened to have in his pocket, leaving his carpenter shop behind without even closing the door.

In Mexico, over-zealous *rurales* had arrested him as a suspicious character, there being political tumult there and the *rurales* becoming nervous over any stranger who carried a gun. For two weeks, Joe Withers had remained in a filthy jail, less than half fed, with the threat of a firing squad hanging over him. One stormy night he had managed to escape, get his horse and gun and ride on.

HE WORKED at such odd jobs as he could find, and finally re-entered the States in a mining district. Good fortune came to him, and he was able to put some money aside. Through cautious inquiries, he had learned that Ed Sells had not died of his wounds and that there was no murder charge against him. But Sells' friends had declared that if Withers ever returned, he would promptly be strung up.

Homesickness came to him. Stony Ridge, only an inconspicuous little town, was the only home he ever had known. And Hiram Bernham, owner of a small tumbledown ranch, was the only man he ever had called friend.

So Joe Withers had decided to slip back, run the risk of being caught and hanged by Sells' friends, visit Bernham, and then perhaps disappear again to continue a lonely life.

Getting to a hideout of comparative safety near Stony Ridge without being seen had been a difficult task, but Withers had accomplished it. He knew the country well, especially the rock hills that rimmed one side of the wide Stony Ridge valley.

He went to a cave with a spring of sweet water near it, where he could be comfortable. In a distant town, he had bought an old pack mare and supplies, and had traveled nights and hidden by day to reach the cave safely. He had unloaded the supplies there, then had led the pack mare down into the valley on a dark night and turned her loose.

Now, on this cold night in late December, Withers was traveling cautiously toward Hiram Bernham's little ranch, where for years Bernham had scratched out a scanty living for himself and his motherless son and daughter.

Withers wanted to talk with Bernham and learn how things stood, whether it would be safe for him to remain in this country or be risking the rope at the hands of Ed Sells and his friends.

He was eager to see Bernham and the children. Ella, the daughter, would be eighteen now, and might even be married. Hal, the boy, would be sixteen, probably shooting up like a rank weed. Withers remembered that the Bernham children had called him Uncle Joe from the day they could talk.

It was about eight o'clock when Withers came to a fence and located an opening through which he passed onto Bernham's land. The sky remained cloudless, but the biting wind was strong. The first real snow of the season might come at any hour.

Presently he saw in the distance a pinpoint of light, and knew it came from the Bernham house. Riding cautiously, watching the shadows and stopping his horse to listen at times, he neared the ranch buildings. The out-buildings were dark. No mount was in the little corral near the house, but he could hear a horse stamping in the barn.

Behind the barn, where the building cut off the light of the stars, Joe Withers dismounted and ground-hitched his horse. Walking along the side of the barn, he got to where he could observe

the rear of the house. The lamp was burning in the kitchen, and on the window was a tattered shade only half pulled down.

He went to the window on tiptoe and peered through it cautiously. Sitting at a littered table, as if they had just finished a meal, were a boy and girl, Ella and Hal Bernham.

Withers saw no sign of Hiram Bernham. He began to fear that his old friend had gone to the distant town of Stony Ridge on business and would not be back until late or until the following day.

He did not want to disclose his presence to Ella or Hal until he was fully acquainted with the situation. There might be danger for Bernham in this; if his enemies discovered he was in the locality and visiting Bernham, Bernham might be made to suffer for shielding him.

On this side of the house the force of the biting wind was broken, and its wild rush did not drown the sound of voices that came from inside. Withers could overhear what was being said.

"Ella, I don't know what we're goin' to do," the boy Hal was saying. "Things have been gettin' worse and worse."

"We can hold on until spring, Hal," the girl told him.

"And what good will that do, Ella? Half starve through a long hard winter and be as bad or worse off when spring comes! We've got only six dollars cash, and not much more we can take to Stony Ridge to trade."

THE girl gave a sigh. "I'm as tired of eating chicken as you are, Hal. There are a lot of other things I'd rather cook and eat. But we'll get by somehow. Our luck's sure to change for the better."

"Let the old ranch go for the mortgage that's on it," Hal suggested. "We could move into Stony Ridge or even go to the county seat. I could get a job."

"Hal! Don't talk like a quitter. Just before he died six months ago, Pa told us to hold on to the ranch whatever we did. We'd get along somehow if we did that, he said. Always have a roof over our heads, even if it does leak sometimes."

Outside the window, Joe Withers heard the words and felt a sudden surge of emotion go through him. So his friend, Hiram Bernham, had been dead for six months. And Bernham's children seemed to be in trouble.

Hal was speaking again. "Yea, I know, Ella," he said. "Pa worked hard, and he could only make a skimpin' livin' on this place. So what can we expect to do? I can get a job somewhere, maybe on the railroad. I'd like that. And you—there's a way out for you."

"A way out for me?" the girl asked. "Are you hinting at Frank Cadder?"

"Reckon so."

"Hal! You'd want me to marry him?"

"Well, he's a bachelor, middle-aged and all, but he's got a good ranch."

"Yes. And he's a heavy drinker and a gambler, and there have been some bad stories about him, Hal. He'd mistreat a wife, make a work horse out of her."

"Well, I just mentioned it. He'll be ridin' out here almost any evenin', now, wantin' your answer. When I saw him in town two weeks ago, he said he'd be droppin' over some evenin' before Christmas. That means any night now. Christmas is only four days off. A fine Christmas it'll be for us!"

"Oh, I'll cook some kind of a Christmas dinner, Hal," Ella said, in an effort to brighten him up. "And I have a present for you, something I knitted myself. I'll consider it present enough for me if you'll only not be so blue all the time."

"Christmas dinner—more chicken, I reckon," Hal said. "I wish I could go up into the hills and shoot a deer."

"Let's forget about it tonight," the girl begged. "Let's go into the front room and read for a time, and then get to bed. It's growing colder. No sense in wasting wood."

Joe Withers watched through the window as they got up from the table, piled the soiled dishes in the sink and went into the front room, Hal carrying the lamp.

They needed help, and Joe Withers wanted to give it to them, but he did not dare appear openly yet. He had to learn the situation regarding himself, even if it meant he had to descend to eavesdropping to do so. He didn't want to have the children of his old friend put in peril through association with him. If he revealed himself to them now, they might through carelessness let it be known he had visited them.

He knew the Frank Cadder they had mentioned, an unsavory character who once had been suspected of cattle rustling and who was disliked cordially by both men and women. These children of Withers' old friend needed help, a counselor. He felt it his duty to act in their father's place.

It was something he would have to think out. He decided to get away now and return the following night. He wanted to be there if Frank Cadder visited the place and thrust his attentions upon an unwilling girl.

From a pocket, Withers took a scrap of soiled paper and the stub of a pencil. In the faint starlight, he scrawled a few words:

A friend is watching over you. I was your father's friend, too, and I owed him some money. Take this and use it for grub and anything else you need to make you comfortable for the winter.

Joe Withers got into his money belt after getting through several layers of clothing, and extracted some currency. The bills he folded into the piece of paper totaled fifty dollars. He went cautiously to the kitchen door and carefully slipped the note and currency under it and into the kitchen. They would be sure to find it there early in the morning.

THE following night, Joe Withers was riding beneath the stars again on his way to the Bernham ranch. During the afternoon, he had shot and dressed a buck, and now was carrying it behind his saddle.

There had been some risk in shooting the buck, for the crack of a rifle carried far in that crisp air, and some wanderer might have heard the shot and investigated. But he had dared the danger to provide a suitable Christmas dinner for the Bernham boy and girl. It was only three days until Christmas, and though they had money now they might not have an opportunity to travel to Stony Ridge and make purchases before the holiday.

Withers was eager to get to the ranch tonight, to listen to their talk and hear their speculations regarding the money he had left for them. And he hoped they would mention him, and give him an inkling of the situation in the neighborhood as far as he was concerned. He wanted to be on hand if Frank Cadder put in an appearance, too.

When he came to the ranch a little earlier than he had arrived the night before, he dismounted behind the barn, got the carcass of the buck off the saddle, and went along the side of the barn toward the house.

The light was burning in the kitchen again, and he could see moving shadows on the tattered shade as Ella passed between the stove and the table. It was warmer tonight, and Withers feared a heavy snowfall. There had been only one light fall of snow so far this season.

As he had done the night before, he got close to the kitchen window and listened. He had to know how things stood if he was going to aid them.

"But we don't know who left the money, Hal, so we can't spend it," he heard Ella telling her brother. "Suppose Frank Cadder left it? I wouldn't ever spend a cent of his money and give him a chance to say he was helping me."

"But he wouldn't have left that much," Hal protested. "Not if I know him."

"Who could have left it, then?"

"Oh, maybe it was some man from Stony Ridge who knew and liked Pa and guessed that we needed help. Maybe he was afraid pride wouldn't let us take it if he rode up openly and offered it."

"It's twenty miles to Stony Ridge, and over a bad road," Ella reminded him. "And anybody who would have done a thing like that probably would have left groceries instead of money."

"Maybe he guessed that we're out of money and wanted to have us buy what we needed most. I reckon everybody in Stony Ridge knows we're broke."

"We won't spend a cent of it until we know more about it," Ella declared firmly. "Anyhow, we couldn't get to Stony Ridge and back now before Christmas. We have a little stock left, and it has to have care. You'd better hitch up the old wagon in the morning and scatter some hay. It may come on a big snow any time now."

Hal was wolfing down his supper, and now Ella sat at the opposite end of the table and began eating also as Joe Withers watched through the window. He was eager to knock and enter and let them know of his presence. But he had a feeling that he should wait. He wasn't thoroughly acquainted with the situation yet.

He remained about the house for about

an hour, until he judged that Frank Cadder would not appear that night. Once, when Ella had opened the kitchen door to throw out dishwater, Withers had hidden himself quickly around the corner of the house. And finally he had put the carcass of the buck on the back steps, mounted his horse and ridden back to the cave, reaching it an hour before dawn.

He slept the greater part of the day and let his horse have a rest. At sunset, he surveyed the floor of the valley and started down the hills again, loping along with every sense alert.

SNOW had not come. When it did, it would make a change in the situation, for after the fall stopped his horse would leave a plain trail far up into the hills, which might be seen and arouse unwelcome curiosity.

For the third time, he ground-hitched his horse behind the barn. The light was burning in the kitchen as usual, and he went up as close to the window as he dared and listened to the conversation again.

"Anyhow, we'll have roast venison for our Christmas dinner," Ella was saying to Hal. "Hanging it in the shed as we did, it'll be frozen and tender and sweet. I'll make dumplings and a corn meal pudding—"

"But who left that deer?" her brother broke in. "First the fifty dollars in cash, and then the deer. Who's tryin' to play Santa Claus around here? What's it all mean?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Hal. Somebody is trying to be kind to us and help us, somebody who seems to not mind traveling for miles to do it. Frank Cadder is our nearest neighbor, and his ranch house is eight miles away."

"Yuh think that Frank Cadder left the money and the deer?" Hal asked.

"No, I really don't. And if he should come pestering around here, Hal, don't you mention the money or deer to him. Maybe whoever left them doesn't want it known except by us."

"It's a mystery that I'm sure goin' to solve!" Hal declared. "If he shows up around here tonight—"

"Listen!" his sister interrupted.

Outside in the open, Joe Withers heard it too. A man's coarse voice was being lifted in song in the near distance, and a mount's hoofs could be heard pounding the frozen ground. Frank Cadder was coming to the Bernham ranch to make his promised visit.

Withers ran back to his horse behind the barn, mounted and waited. He heard Frank Cadder at the front of the house calling to those inside. Sure that Cadder was not coming to the barn, Withers dismounted and trailed his reins again, got his rifle from the saddle boot, and went back to the house.

The lamp had been carried from the kitchen to the front room, at one window of which was another tattered shade. Withers h u r r i e d there and crouched outside the window, peering through a crack in the shade and listening.

Frank Cadder was tall, almost skinny, with a prominent Adam's apple, little eyes too close together, a scraggy sandy-colored mustache badly tobacco-stained, and sandy hair that had been "slicked down" for this special occasion. He was sprawling in a chair, grinning at Ella, who sat stiffly and prim in another chair across the room from him. Hal was leaning against the wall near the kitchen door.

"Ella, how long are yuh goin' to keep me waitin'?" Cadder asked. "If yuh say the word, we can go to the county seat right after Christmas and get married before New Year's. We can have a holiday party over at my place and invite a lot of the folks. I'll fetch yuh a new dress and a lot of ribbons and sich from Stony Ridge, and anything else yuh want."

"I haven't said I'd marry you," Ella told him. "And I'm telling you right now that you're wasting your time coming here, Frank Cadder. I'll never marry you!"

Cadder laughed. "I've heard tell that it's the reg'lar thing for a girl to say she won't and then change her mind. Yuh've been sayin' yuh won't for quite a spell, and it's time for yuh to stop talkin' nonsense. I've got a good ranch and can give yuh a good livin' and a good home. I'll stock up this tumbledown outfit and let Hal run it for a split in the profits, even lendin' him a man or two to help. Where else can yuh git a deal like that?"

"You're only wasting your time, I say, talking to me like this, Frank Cadder," Ella replied. "My mind's made up. I'll get you some hot coffee now, then you can ride home."

CADDER'S face reddened.

"Yeah? Do yuh think that I'll let Hi Bernham's ragged, starvin' girl treat me like this?" Cadder got to his feet, his eyes blazing with anger. "I don't want any more of yore nonsense now! It's time yuh came to yore senses and learned what's best for yuh."

"Yuh stop talkin' to my sister like that!" Hal cried at him. "Yuh get right out of here, and never come back! Yuh'd better get goin'!"

"For a thin dime, button, I'd smack yuh back against the wall and smack yuh hard!" Cadder warned him. "Yuh keep out of this affair."

Hal flattened himself back against the wall, looking around as if in search of a weapon. Cadder started toward the girl.

"Keep away from me!" she cried.

Outside the window, Withers caught the note of fear in her voice. Her back was toward the window, so he could not see her face. Hal started toward Cadder again.

"Keep away from me!" Ella was crying at Cadder. "Don't you dare touch me!"

"Who do yuh think yuh are?" Cadder asked, angrily. "A ragged, starvin', skinny little thing like you refusin' to marry me! I'll cure yuh of yore nonsense!"

"Hal, get Pa's gun from the kitchen!" Ella shouted at him. "Make him keep away from me!"

"If yuh make a move, button, I'll blast yuh with my own six-gun," Cadder threatened. "Stand right where yuh are! Don't make a move!"

Joe Withers decided that it was time to draw cards in this game. It was quiet inside the house for a moment as Frank Cadder moved slowly across the room toward the girl. And in that moment Joe Withers broke the silence.

"Cadder!" he shouted, knowing that he could be heard easily inside the house. "Come out of there! We're watchin' yuh! Yuh've got one chance. Come out pronto, get in yore saddle and ride, and don't ever pester the girl again! If yuh don't, yuh'll get yore fill of hot lead."

Through the crack in the window shade, Joe Withers could see the expression of astonishment that came into Cadder's face, could see also Hal's bulging eyes and hear Ella's cry of relief.

"Who—who?" Cadder muttered.

"Make it quick, Cadder!" Withers yelled at him. "If we have to come in there after yuh, yuh won't be able to walk out. Last chance!"

Cadder hesitated for a moment, his hand s t r a y i n g toward his holster. "Who's that yellin'?" he demanded of Ella.

"I—I don't know," she replied. "Honestly I don't."

"Are yuh goin' to come out of there?" Withers yelled at Cadder again. "We'll give yuh about a minute more!"

Through the crack in the shade, Withers saw Cadder turn and rush toward the door.

"Ella, you and Hal keep inside," Withers called.

Almost silently, he ran around to the front corner of the house. A streak of light shot out as Cadder opened the door and emerged and closed the door quickly behind him. Withers could hear the boots of the unwelcome visitor grinding the frozen gravel in front of the house as he hurried toward his pony.

"Hurry it up!" Withers shouted.

He could imagine Frank Cadder tossing quick looks in every d i r e c t i o n, searching for shadows. The uncertainty of the situation was wrecking Cadder's nerves.

Cadder had no clue to the identity of the man who had shouted at him, did not know how many men were outside around the house, and could not guess at their purpose or what they might do. In a panic, he swung up into his saddle, prodded with his rowels and rode down the lane, bending low in his saddle.

Joe Withers sent a wild rifle shot after him to urge him to utmost speed. Then he ran along the side of the house and back to the barn. He was in his own saddle in a moment, and had ridden a short distance to a dark spot behind a tool shed, from where he could watch the house.

THE sound of hoofbeats dwindled rapidly in the distance, and Withers knew there need be no more fear of Frank Cadder. There was silence in the house for a short time, and then light flashed in the kitchen and the rear door was opened, and Ella Bernham stood in the streak of light.

"Who's there?" she called. "Thank you, whoever you are. Won't you come in?"

Hal appeared in the doorway behind his sister, his eyes still bulging.

"I can't come in just now, thanks," Withers called. "I reckon yuh'll be all right after this. I'll see that Cadder doesn't bother yuh again."

"Please come in!"

"There's a reason why I can't just now," Withers called in reply. "Maybe some other time."

He swung his horse around the tool shed and began riding swiftly over the frozen ground in the starlight.

The sky was cloudy when Joe Withers left the cave the next evening, and a flake of snow was drifting earthward now and then.

"The snow's comin'," he muttered. "I've got to do somethin' right away, make some decision. Can't spend the winter in the cave. Wouldn't have feed for my horse."

The journey tonight was slower because he did not have even the faint light of the stars. But finally he reached the barn and dismounted to ground-hitch his horse as he had before.

The light burned in the kitchen. Withers wondered if he dare knock and disclose his presence. Ella and Hal could tell him whether it would be dangerous for him to remain near Stony Ridge. But, if feeling still ran high against him, and it was known he visited here, it might cause more trouble for Hiram Bernham's boy and girl.

He started to walk along the side of the barn, and finally came to a stop at the corner of the building to look toward the lighted kitchen window.

From a spot of darkness nearby came Hal's boyish voice:

"Stop right there! Get yore hands up, pronto, or I'll shoot! Walk out straight into that streak of light!"

Joe Withers almost chuckled. Hal's voice was shaking, but Hi Bernham's boy had courage.

"Reckon yuh got me," Withers grumbled. "My hands are up, and I'm walkin' where yuh said."

He strode out into the streak of light that came from the kitchen door.

"I've got him, Ella, whoever he is!" the boy cried. "He's muffled up so I can't see his face."

"Make him come in, Hal."

Joe Withers chuckled again and went on to the door, up the steps and into the lighted kitchen, his hands still held high. Hal followed at his heels and closed the door, but still menaced with the gun.

"Are yuh the man who's been comin' here every night, the man who left that money and the deer and scared Frank Cadder away?" Hal asked.

"I reckon so," Withers confessed.

Ella was watching him intently, "Who are you?" she asked. "And why did you do it? There seems to be something familiar about you."

"Your Pa was my friend," Withers explained. "I came to see him, and learned he'd died. Found his kids in trouble and tried to help 'em. That's all."

"But why didn't you come right to us instead of acting as you did?" Ella asked.

"I didn't want anybody to know I was in these parts. Might cause yuh trouble if folks knew I visited yuh."

"Unwrap yore muffler from over your face," Hal ordered. "And don't try to touch that six-gun yuh're wearing, or I'll blast yuh."

WITHERS started to lower his hands and undo the long muffler he had wrapped over his face almost up to his eyes as a guard against the cold. But suddenly he froze. He, as well as Ella and Hal, had heard the creaking of wagon wheels, a loud voice calling "Whoa!" and the sound of a vehicle being brought to a stop in front of the house.

"Listen!" Withers whispered to them. "I'm yore friend. Let me hide in this closet till yuh see who's come. I promise yuh not to run away. Yuh both act natural, and don't tell 'em I'm here, or that anybody's here. Be quick!"

Somebody pounded on the front door.

"Quick!" Withers repeated. "I'll be on hand if anybody tries to trouble yuh. Yuh've got to trust me. Yore father was my friend, and I've tried to help yuh."

"Get into the closet," Ella whispered. "It's all right, Hal, I'm sure. You keep your gun handy, Hal."

The pounding at the front door was being repeated as Joe Withers slipped into the small closet and closed the door all but a crack. The closet was small and more than half filled with cooking utensils and brooms and mops.

Withers heard Ella and Hal going into the front room. One of them carried the lamp and left the kitchen dark except for light that came through a crack from the front room. Joe Withers removed his right mitten, worked the fingers of his

hand to induce better blood circulation, and got his six-gun out of the holster at his hip.

He heard muffled voices and Ella's surprised greeting and the gruff voice of a man that seemed familiar. Getting quietly out of the closet, Withers inched carefully toward the door of the front room, avoiding articles of furniture and walking on tiptoe.

"Please sit down right here," he heard Ella telling somebody. "Take off your things. I'll get you some hot coffee. It must be cold riding."

"Turnin' warmer and maybe goin' to snow," a man's voice answered.

Withers got close to the door and peered through the crack. He could have a good view of the front room from where he stood. A man was standing with his back toward Withers, removing a heavy coat. He straightened and turned—and Joe Withers saw he was Ed Sells, the man he had shot in Stony Ridge a little more than a year before.

The second man turned also, and Withers recognized him as one of Sells' close friends, a man who had done Sells' confidential work for years.

The two visitors sat down, and Ed Sells, a heavy man with a florid face, looked at Ella and Hal.

"Thought we'd drive out and see how you kids were getting along," Ed Sells said. "Got to worryin' about you. You've got to forgive me for not visitin' you before. But I've been mighty busy at my ranch and in the county seat. Had a court case that kept me there for some time."

"I—we're glad you came," Ella stammered.

"I knew your father pretty well, and liked him. He was just one of those men who don't get along well. But I admired the way he stuck to it. And I admire the way you kids have stuck to it since he died. I've been lookin' into your circumstances."

"Oh, we're all right," Ella said, proudly.

"You can be honest with me," Sells told her. "The thing that brought me out tonight was—well, Frank Cadder was in town early this mornin' with a strange story to tell. After tellin' how he called here last night to see you kids, he said that there was a strange man who shot at him and ran him off the place. Said he thought maybe some outlaw had moved in on you and that you might be in danger."

"That lyin' Cadder!" Hal exclaimed. "He's been pesterin' around Ella. He was here last night, and got fresh. Somebody outside yelled for him to get away quick, and he did. I heard whoever was outside yell and shoot."

"Who did that?" Sells asked.

"We didn't know," Ella replied, quickly.

SELLS clenched his big fists with anger.

"If there's somebody like that in the neighborhood, I'll have some of my men come over here and run him down," he promised. "Don't want you kids to be in danger, or even annoyed. Seen him since, whoever he is?"

Watching through the crack in the door, Withers saw Hal gulp and act embarrassed, and heard Ella stammer as she tried to reply. Their actions were enough to reveal to Sells and his friend that Bernham's boy and girl were hiding something.

Might as well have an end of it, Withers thought. He pulled down his muffler to expose his face, jerked the door open with his left hand, and strode out into the lighted front room, his weapon held ready.

"Freeze!" he ordered. "Don't move!"

"It's Uncle Joe!" Hal cried.

"Joe Withers!" Ed Sells exclaimed, as he and his friend sprang out of their chairs and put up their hands. "So you've come back!"

"I'm back! Understand, these kids didn't know it! I came back to see my old friend, Hi Bernham, and learned he was dead. I was homesick."

"If you carry on our own quarrel and shoot me down now—" Sells began.

"Steady! I don't go around shootin' people. I didn't shoot yuh that day in Stony Ridge till yuh started to draw, and yuh know it! But I hit my saddle and rode, 'cause yore friends would have strung me up. I heard yuh got well, and that yore friends were promisin' to hang me if I ever came back. So I came sneakin' around like a thief, to learn where I stand."

"Good grief!" Sells exclaimed. "I owe you a lot, Withers. Tried to find you, but couldn't. I told my friends that I deserved what I got that day, that in my rage I started to draw. And I

passed word that if you ever came back you weren't to be harmed. I've kept your carpenter shop shipshape for you while you've been gone."

"That's right, Uncle Joe," Ella put in. "Oh, Uncle Joe, I'm so glad you came back! Hal and I—we've been so lonesome and blue."

"Holster your gun, Withers, and shake hands," Ed Sells said, lowering his right hand and extending it. "You know me—I've always tried to be a man of my word. You're welcome back home. And you'll be treated like before you ran away, or somebody will hear from me."

Like a man half stunned, Joe Withers sheathed his gun and took Sells' outstretched hand, then shook hands with Sells' grinning companion.

"Now, to business," Sells told them, "and then we'll drink some of your hot coffee, Ella, and start back to Stony Ridge. Must get there before the snow comes. I want to help you kids. I bought your mortgage from the bank so you won't be bothered about that. Forget the mortgage and think of other things. I'll get some men out here soon as weather permits and repair the house and barn. Send you some feed, too. Got a wagonload of groceries outside. And forget your pride! I'll keep track of every cent, and you can pay me back some day when you're able."

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Sells!" Ella sobbed. "We don't want to leave the ranch."

"Wait a second!" Withers shouted. "I'm in on this. Hi Bernham was my best friend, and these kids have always called me Uncle Joe. I've got some money I made minin' the past year. I'll put it into the pot and go pardners with the kids, live here with 'em. They'll be my folks. Ain't got any others."

"Oh, yes, Uncle Joe!" Ella cried. "I'll cook you the best Christmas dinner!"

"Gee, yes!" Hal said.

"Well, everything seems settled happily," Ed Sells declared, laughing. "Ella, you get that coffee making. We'll carry in the groceries and some extra Christmas fixing's we brought. Withers, you come along and help us. Folks say two men are always better friends after they've had a good scrap."

"Tombstone Jones, You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Woman and then Take a Trip—"

THAT'S what Madame Oglethorpe, who reads your future, told Tombstone Jones. When Tombstone reported to Speedy, that worthy was plumb disappointed.

"I sent you up there just to ask about our jobs," he said. "And you waste our last dollar on a tall, dark woman!"

"She seen her in the crystal ball," said Tombstone.

"Well, there's just one thing to do—call on Jim Keaton and find out if we still got jobs!"

When the rollicking waddies went to the office, they didn't see Jim Keaton. They saw instead, the tall, dark woman! She happened to be Mrs. Keaton. And she sent them on a trip—to Smoke Tree City to smoke out some skullduggery!

Then—it's lucky for Tombstone and Speedy that they're as deft in ducking lead as they are in dodging work, for their task is to corral a two-gun woman bandit whose specialty is slaughter! It's a roarin' rodeo of laughs and thrills—WHEN THE JOKER WENT WILD, a novelet by W. C. Tuttle bringing you Tombstone and Speedy at their funniest and best! Look forward to it in the next issue.

A Complete Novelet

MAN-BAIT FOR A

CHAPTER I

Where Death Waits

PRIEST'S GULCH was like Hell, easy to get into and hard to quit. And once you were one of its denizens, you weren't wanted anywhere else. Great-bodied Peter Priest had a way of branding a man as his own. Slim Clem Riddle knew these things well. Yet he was headed for Priest's Gulch.

"Putting my fool neck in a noose," he muttered in the night as he rode into the sleeping settlement, barely more than a bump on the trail, on Bitter Milk Creek. "And all over a woman with yellow hair," he added. But his voice softened as he said that. Eileen Fardow could soften any hombre.

Ahead he spotted the lights of a two-bit barroom, decided he'd eat. He veered the roan into the hitchrail, dropped from the kak and headed for the door. It was jerked open and three gents came hustling out. The bow-legged, frog-like one galvanized on the second step.

"Riddle—the Hellfire Deputy of Norcross!" he yelled.

And Clem Riddle recognized Pat Aguerra, the breed gunman with whom

To Aid a Girl, Clem Riddle Rides into the

Riddle drove them back with a final barrage of lead

GUN TRAP

By T. W. FORD

he'd tangled in his badge-packing days, whose saddle pard, Charlie Bierman, he'd put in the Big House with a life sentence. Riddle's left hand was already in the dive for that ivory-stocked Colts in his single holster. He threw himself sideward as he rode the trigger. Raging lead tore at him.

He saw one of his enemies sink on a broken leg. Aguerra had flung himself down behind the far corner of the little place. Riddle whipped lead at the third one, who was dodging in the shadows. Then the ex-deputy flung himself into the saddle.

A bullet nicked his hat brim as he wheeled away from the hitchrail. He rose in the stirrups to drive Aguerra and the other one back with a final barrage of lead. Then he went high-tailing back up the road the way he had come in. He cut around a logpole cabin and out onto the dunes behind the town, came to the creek between its deep, sandy banks and dropped down into it.

He hated to run from those snakes. But he had far more important business to attend. He pushed his pony through the shallow water, following the creek eastward though the route to Priest's

Dangerous Outlaw Town of Priest's Gulch!

Gulch lay to the southwest. He didn't want this Pat Aguerra snooping on his back-trail when he stuck his nose into the outlaw settlement in the Gulch.

Some miles on he quit the creek course and bore south, figuring to loop around to the southwest later in the night. He unholstered his Colts to check the cartridge chambers. They were empty. Instinctively his left hand went up to the other gun in a shoulder sling beneath his white calfskin vest. And he realized how close it had been.

"And suppose it had been smack in the Gulch town, in Peter Priest's camp, that I'd run into him," he told himself.

IT WAS enough to make even a wire-tough hombre like him take second thought. For perhaps half a mile, he pondered on turning back. All the odds were stacked against him.

"But I never have before in my life," he said softly to the night. Beneath the softness was a note of iron, the iron that was in the blood and bone of him.

At first glance, nobody would have suspected that iron. He was a slight man with a flat, high-shouldered body perched on long legs in tight-fitting gray pants. The only powerful-looking thing about him was his over-sized bony hands. He had calm gray eyes in a lean face bisected by a high-bridged nose. And a trick of carrying a cold quirly butt in his lips as if he'd forgotten it.

The tipoff came on second glance. Then a gent became aware, acutely aware, that Clem Riddle had seen him first. And that Riddle had already appraised him and read plenty.

Later in the night he halted to munch on some cold grub from his saddle roll. He knew it was loco to continue, to go on in. If he were once recognized as an ex-deputy in that killer's nest, the game would be up. But he had to go on for Eileen's sake. For a moment he saw her yellow-haired vision in the night. When he swung back into the saddle, a wry smile twisted his mouth. It was sort of funny. When he had turned in his deputy's badge back in Norcross, he thought it was to hang up his guns and live a life of peace. Now—

He was still young, in his mid-twenties, when he quit as a John Law with an enviable record as a relentless manhunter—dubbed the "Hellfire Deputy." But in that Pancake Hollow fight, a bullet had pierced his forearm, severing a tendon that left the first two fingers of his right hand half paralyzed. He could no longer sling a gun with it.

So he had taken stock and figured it was time to quit and settle down and raise a family. He had drifted down into the Little Brazos country and bought himself a small cow outfit with his savings. And he had met the proud yellow-haired Eileen Fardow, of the Box-F outfit, an unbroken, headstrong little filly with big black eyes. Had wooed her and won her. They were to be married in another month.

Then the reckless, hell-raising Jeff Fardow, her brother and owner of the outfit, had gotten in this tight. One night in town a stranger had accused the hot-headed Jeff of cheating in a stud game. Jeff had shot him dead in his tracks. And then they had discovered the lawman's star on the stranger. Jeff had hit saddle leather and quit the country.

Within twenty-four hours it was discovered the dead man was no John Law but an impostor. That, instead, he was one Winters, a wanted killer with a price on his head. And that same day a rider had come in from Samson Wells with a message from the fugitive Jeff. Jeff sent word that he was heading for Priest's Gulch, that haven of many a hunted man before him. Clem Riddle had been at the Fardow ranch when Eileen got the message. And she had asked him to go into the Gulch and bring out her brother, who was now in the clear.

Clem Riddle had refused. It was asking too much of him, a man who was marked as a manhunter on the owlhoot trails. It was crazy. She had gone from the room with scorn in her dark eyes. When he called the next day to explain his position, she had refused to see him.

But three nights later he had wakened from a sound sleep with the realization that he had to have Eileen for his wife, that life without her would be meaningless. He had saddled up and hit the trail at dawn, sending word to her he was going. Now, here he was, close to the mouth of the Gulch. And he realized quite coldly there was but a slight chance of his coming out of it to take her in his arms again.

He stopped in a hollow for a couple of hours of shuteye. There was no sign

of any pursuit by Aguerra. He woke and moved on across the plain and into the Gulch. Dawn was coming. He rode at a hand lope, his eyes thoughtful. He held few cards in this game.

HE DID know that once you rode in, Peter Priest had a trick of holding you. He would get a gent involved in some raid or shooting fracas. Then, if a man wanted to quit and clear out, he found himself branded on the outside with Priest holding the evidence over him. But the strange thing was that Priest himself had no official charges against him. There was no real evidence on the record against him.

About a month back, Cutter Masters, one of Priest's lieutenants, had been captured up in Riddle's old bailiwick, Norcross. Due to stretch rope with several killings against him, Masters had been told that if he would talk, give them something on Priest himself, he would escape with life. He had been willing. But there was little he could tell.

"Well, Masters won't be in the camp, anyway," Riddle told himself. And that was a break for him. Because, five or six years back, he and Masters had met. Riddle thought of Priest's other lieutenant, one Long Joe Best, a coffin-faced killer who'd burn down a man as quick as he would spit. But Best didn't know him, anyway.

The rising sun began to finger the west Gulch wall. The big boulders shed their menacing forms in the waning night. Tendrils of slow-boiling ground mist wound through the yucca and hung like white shrouds over the patches of greasewood. The gulch angled westward, then hooked back due south again. Then he caught the smell of wood smoke on the gentle breeze and knew he was close.

He rounded a knobby elbow of rock and the outlaw town lay a few hundred feet ahead where the gulch abruptly bulged wide on both sides. It was a jumble of cabins clustered around a single rugged street hedged by unpainted boxlike buildings that were whisky mills and honky tonks. The trail dipped down sharply into a pool of mist.

He caught the scrape of other horse hoofs somewhere ahead as he dropped into the fog but he kept riding. He had to enter as if he had nothing to fear, had to maintain his bluff. Emerging from the patch of mist like stepping through a wall, he sighted the pair of riders some ten yards ahead.

The long-bodied one twisted in the hull to glance back. His jaw unsprung. He said something and his companion wheeled his horse savagely, the mouth-tortured animal rearing. It was froglike Pat Aguerra and he shouted a startled curse.

After scouring the dunes around the settlement in vain for Riddle, Aguerra and his companion had come on to the Gulch. They had taken a direct route while Riddle had looped around, hence had gotten into the Gulch first. All three sat frozen a moment.

Then hands were ripping at holsters. Riddle's hogleg roared first. The gent with Aguerra was lifted half out of the saddle, pitched to the road, dead. Aguerra had fired once, missed. He triggered another slug that whispered evilly in Riddle's ear as it passed. Then he flung his horse around the other way to hit for the protection of the main street.

Riddle knew if he once got to cover and told him he, Riddle, was the Hellfire Deputy, it would be all over. He threw the spurs to his roan. And then Aguerra's excited horse reared wildly again, throwing him.

Aguerra hit the shale on all fours and scrambled into the high grass beside the trail. From behind a boulder he threw down on Riddle, who hit the ground running and went in after him. A slug nicked the side of his gray pants and he dropped to his knees.

Aguerra, thinking he had hit him, moved from one side of the rock. Riddle nicked him in the left arm. Leaping away, Aguerra fled through the grass toward the town. Clem Riddle closed in on him and Aguerra dropped behind a hummock of shale. Zigzagging, Riddle kept coming.

He buckled with a stinging sensation under his ribs, grazed. Lurching, he jammed the one Colt inside his waistband and got the gun from the shoulder rig. He let go again. Mortally hit, Aguerra triggered on an empty shell. And even as he started down in the death spasm, he sent the gun hurtling through the swirling smoke. The heavy steel missile hit Riddle on the side of the skull.

Dazing, blinding lights exploding inside his head, Riddle lurched by the prone Aguerra, the scene swimming in

a haze before him. He saw gun slicks from the camp on the road, wondered vaguely why they hadn't joined in, why they weren't burning him down now. Beyond them he made out the massive hulk of flesh watching from the steps of a barroom, the notorious Peter Priest himself.

Clem Riddle's knees hit the ground and he slowly folded up. All he knew was that he was in the lobo lair, at the mercy of those gun snakes, after having smoked down one of their tribe. . . .

CHAPTER II

In the Enemy's Camp

WHEN he woke up he kept his eyes shuttering trying to get the setup. He heard the jangle of a piano in the distance, then the voices of men in the next room. He edged open his eyes cautiously and realized he was on a Teton pole cot in one of the cabins. He saw his outer clothes and his boots on a chair. He saw his gunbelt and his shoulder rig, but the holsters of both were empty.

When he tried to move, dizziness shot through him. He became aware of the bandage on his wounded side, the one around his head. Then the door slammed back and a big bearded man came in with a bowl of soup.

"So the shootin' fool's woke up, huh?" he said genially. "Well, just lie back and Jake'll feed you." He hunkered beside the cot and began to ladle the thick soup into Riddle's mouth. He told him the doc had patched him up and that he'd be fit as a fiddle soon. When the soup was gone he went out and returned with a big tin of whisky. Then he gave Riddle a tailor-made cigaret and held a match for him.

With fresh strength working through his veins, Clem Riddle tried to figure it. He was baffled. This was one danged strange way to treat a hairpin who'd burned down one of the bunch. Through the thin blanket nailed over the window he could tell night was approaching. He said he'd slept long. Jake told him the doc had given him something to make him rest.

"No hurry 'bout getting up, mister. What's your handle, by the way?" Jake said.

"Riddle." And the ex-deputy looked him straight in the eye.

"Rid—" Jake's eyes bulged as he slapped a hand to the walnut gun butt on his hip. Then he chuckled, shaking his head. He had thought of the Norcross deputy of that name, but discarded the idea. No lawman would be fool enough to ride into this camp single-handed, alone. And that was exactly how Clem Riddle expected them to reason.

He got dressed, very unsteady at first. But another shot of the redeye cleared his senses and strengthened him. Jake helped him.

"Priest'll be wanting to see you, 'course. But he usually sleeps all day. We'll mosey around the place," Jake said. They went out into the twilight and a lean hatchet-faced man by the door fell in beside them. Yellow coal-oil lamps winked shining eyes through the windows of the honky tonks and bars.

"Everything here a man could want," Jake said as they strode along, motioning to the open door of a gambling hall. He waved as a painted-faced girl called from the doorway of a house. "Sure. Gambling, whisky, and gals. What more does a man live for, huh?"

Riddle frowned in perplexity. It sounded as if Jake were trying to sell him a bill of goods. It didn't make sense. His roving eyes noted the narrow opening of a cut in the gulch wall back beyond an open lot. A short distance down was another cut, barely wide enough for a horse. And Clem Riddle knew there were more slits in the rock wall, slits that wound back deep into the broken country.

They twisted and criss-crossed, splitting and branching to form a labyrinthine maze, an unmapped web of winding defiles. It was these that made it impossible to wipe out this lobo hellhole. When posses had come in, in the past, the Priest's Gulch scum had simply retreated into the labyrinth and cut to ribbons the bunches who sought to dig them out.

"Let's stop in the dancehall," said Jake, breaking in on Riddle's reflections. "They got a new girl there, and she is a

real beauty."

"Pretty as a spotted pony," said the hatchet-faced one.

THEY turned into a barnlike place with rag-stuffed front windows. As they stepped into the glow of the coal-oil lamps, a fiddle and an accordion joined in with the piano. Booted carousing gents with beard-stubbled faces swung onto the rough floor with painted hussies in their arms. Over to one side, a red-haired giant at a table with a brassy-haired wench drummed wildly on the table top with a gun butt to have a fresh bottle of redeye served him. Men were bellied thicker than flies at the big bar counter running down the left side. The din at times drowned out the music.

Riddle and Jake wedged in near the back end of the counter and had a drink. Riddle was aware of men studying him furtively, and he couldn't understand why this wolf-eyed pack had let him live this long.

"She'll be comin' along," Jake said, putting down a half-finished drink hurriedly. "And she is one real fancy filly!"

The music had broken off and the white-haired "Perfessor" had risen from the piano to wave the dancers from the floor. The crowd began to clap before Riddle saw anybody appear. A woman wrapped in a cloak with its hood covering her hair moved quickly from a hallway at the back to the end of the dance floor.

A hush of respect fell over the place as she paused beside the battered piano. The "Perfessor" struck a few banging chords. And then she swept off the cloak to stand before them in a daring crimson evening gown with a slit up one side of the skirt, her yellow hair gleaming in the blinking light of the coal-oil lamps.

A wild roar broke from the crowd. Men leaped to their feet, flung their hats onto the spur-gashed floor, threw kisses. Glasses were lifted in toast.

"Lily! Lily! Sing for us, Lily!" came the cries from every side. Clem Riddle himself, eyes ripped wide, clutched the bar for support in sick astonishment. For the woman in the red gown, the one they hailed as "Lily," was his Eileen. Eileen here in this lobo helltown!

"The Blue Haze of Texas" was the first number she sang in her low but bell-like voice. Her body with its pinch-bottle waist swayed to the music. When she finished, there was another wild outcry with silver dollars and gold coins spattering the floor around her. Riddle stood rigid, sweat pouring from him as he watched her smile boldly back at the crowd.

She sang two more numbers, but he scarcely heard them. He was sick inside at the idea of her being in this hellhole. For the first time in his life he knew the taste of sheer stark terror. Terror for her.

"Ain't she a beauty?" said Jake. "But don't try to touch her. She's Cutter Masters' woman."

Eileen had picked up the cloak and was leaving the floor with salvos of applause rolling after her. And then a ruckus broke out beside them at the bar as a red-headed woman, jealous at the way her man cheered this "Lily," slapped him. He promptly belted her one back. A man jumped up from a table, dragging a knife, to take her part. Soon it was a melee. And Riddle found himself separated from the pair with him.

Grabbing his chance, he glided around a table. At the rear he saw her cloaked figure hurrying down a hallway and called to her. When she turned, he strode quickly down.

"Cl-Clem? You?" she gasped.

He started to take her in his arms when a nearby door opened and a hussy stepped out. Riddle reined himself in. He couldn't get her suspected. "This—it's locoed," he said, hoarse with emotion. "How—"

Her full lips parted. "But Clem, when you said you wouldn't come, I had to do something—to try to save Jeff. So—I came in myself."

"You little fool!" he groaned. His arms yearned for her, and yet he was angry because she had complicated things by coming here.

SHE told him quickly, keyed-up herself. She had gotten into the camp the day before, simply riding in, giving her name as "Lily" and saying she was Cutter Masters' woman. She'd told Priest she was a singer, that Masters had sent her word from jail to come here, that they would take care of her here in the Gulch.

"It was safe enough, Clem. I had to do something. Something! You told me they'd captured Masters back in

Norcross. Nobody'll touch me because they think I belong to him. Masters is supposed to be the top gunslinger in this place."

Riddle's fisted hands worked at his sides. The girl didn't seem to appreciate her danger. Then he saw that behind the lively glitter of her eyes there was terror, and he reached out, clasped her arms for a brief moment.

"Have you seen Jeff?" he asked huskily.

She shook her head, face somber. Not only had she not seen him, she had picked up no word of him.

"We'll dig him out somehow. I'm seeing Priest himself sometime tonight, and—" He caught the creak of a boot behind him, and he whispered swiftly, "We're watched! I'm going to grab you. Slap my face—hard—as if you were repulsing me. Don't ask questions now!"

He stepped closer and grabbed her, laughing loudly. "Just one little kiss, honey, for old times' sake and—"

Her hand stung his cheek, then she darted through the door on her right. Riddle turned, rubbing his jaw, to face Hatchet Face advancing down the hall, hand on gun butt. Riddle said something about the girl being a regular little wildcat.

The hatchet-faced one nodded, unsmiling. "You're lucky that's all you got. She's Cutter Masters' woman. You shouldn't touch her." He jerked with his head. "Priest is ready to see you."

Peter Priest was eating, and eating, with Priest, was a major operation. A pear-shaped mountain of flesh himself, he sat at a table laden with food and kept shoveling it into his bejowled face. He paused briefly at times to shake his grayish hair, that fell almost to his shoulders, and his little eyes shuttled constantly from the grub to Clem Riddle seated across the table. Several gunmen stood by.

"Riddle? You say your handle is Riddle? Not the Riddle from Norcross!"

"Sure. That's me. Why, any danged badge-packer would ride right in here single-handed!"

"No, you ain't *that* Riddle, the Hellfire Deputy," Priest said. "He's a two-gun gent. I saw you shooting this morning. You shoot left-handed—just left-handed." He piled another cargo of grub on his fork and transported it to his face, oblivious of the gravy running down his chin. He got out thickly, "What was you after Aguerra for, anyway?"

"Aguerra was after me. Seems one time I let a mite of daylight into a pard of his," Riddle said, nonchalant but wary.

Priest belched, and nodded. "Well, you saved me some trouble with that fancy shooting. I'd have had to kill Aguerra. He was responsible for them law dogs up Norcross way capturing Cutter Masters. Aguerra ran out and left Masters in a corner."

RIDDLE masked his relief, saying nothing.

Priest swallowed a whole fried egg off his knife. "But if you wasn't following Aguerra, why was you headed into the Gulch, Riddle?"

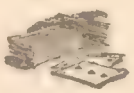
Riddle calmly worked dirt from beneath a thumb nail with a match stick. "Pelican in here I got a score to settle with—private. I aimed to take him out and settle it." But when Priest asked him who the pelican was, Riddle shook his head. "I should name him and give him warning? No."

"Smart, ain't you?" Priest pushed away his plate and leaned forward. "Mebbe you're smart enough to do a certain job. Mebbe—Riddle, you can git this pelican you want. I could give you a free hand. Uh-huh. Pervided you do something for me. A trigger slammer like you can do it, by grab!"

"What is it?" Riddle asked quietly.

"Get Long Joe Best for me, Riddle! Get him and you can have your man." Priest picked up the tin cup of redeye again, gurgled it down.

Clem Riddle hid his surprise. Best was Peter Priest's other lieutenant with the now jailed Masters. It didn't make sense. Priest seemed to read his mind.



There were two ways Evers Chance could play his cards—one led to dishonor, the other to death—and it was a lovely woman who called his hand in A BARGAIN WITH SIX-GUN LAW, by JOE ARCHIBALD. Next Issue!

"Best got too ambitious, Mister," he said. "He aimed to rule the roost here—'stead of me." He went on, telling how Best had split the bunch and started a revolt. There had been a night-long bloody fight in the Gulch town before Best was finally driven out. He had escaped with his hide intact.

"I don't like gents who try to double-cross me—I don't like 'em alive," Priest said heavily. He picked up a scrap of meat from the platter with his fingers. "And I know where he is now, Riddle."

He was right down in Ricon, the small town just beyond the south end of the Gulch, Priest said. He was down there with some gun-slick pards, waiting. Priest admitted he had sent three different men in the past couple of weeks to deal with Long Joe Best.

"None of 'em has returned. Long Joe is a big piece of poison with his smoke-poles. Big. I'm giving it to you with the bark off. *Sabe?* Go into Ricon. Put that gopher under the ground, and—you can have your man."

After some seconds, Riddle nodded unhurriedly. "What's to prove to you that I've done it, Priest?"

"Simple. Best totes a pair of Colts with gold stars on the butts. He prizes 'em like they were his right arm. Thinks they're lucky fer him. You can't miss Joe Best. He's 'bout six-foot-six an' he always wears black duds. Got a couple gold teeth in the front of his mouth. An' he walks with a mite of a limp. But bring me back one of them starred guns and I'll know you got him. Best'd sooner die than lose one of 'em."

Riddle measured stares with Priest. Clem knew he had practically no alternative. Still, he wondered if it could be some kind of a trick or trap. Priest shoved out a big fleshy hand.

"Get Best—and you get your man, Riddle. You got my solemn word on it. And there ain't no hombre living who can say Peter Priest ever busted his word. All right?"

Riddle shook with the boss of the lobo town then. It was true, Priest always kept his promise to a gent, whether he had vowed to kill him or give him a thousand dollars for some job. It explained his hold over his men. Priest wished him good luck. Riddle smiled bleakly, rubbing that empty holster with his thumb. Once again he was going to be gambling with his life.

CHAPTER III

Date to Kill

THEY went back to the dancehall, Jake and Clem Riddle with the hatchet - faced one still trailing along. Now the Gulch town's night life was in full swing. A cacophony of intermixed music and shouting and maudlin singing, occasionally spattered with the wanton laughter of a hussy, welled in wild discord all along the ragged street. Stumbling out of a whisky mill's door, an orey-eyed man grappled with Riddle. The hatchet-faced one struck him hard in the mouth, dumping him into an alley. They turned into the now crowded dance-hall and went to the bar.

"Joe Best is a-going to be a tough scissor bill to knock over, Riddle," Jake said.

Clem Riddle remained poker-faced as he lifted a drink. Everything was arranged. He had told Priest he would leave sometime late in the night to hit Ricon early in the morning. But he had selected the late pre-dawn time because he had to get Eileen out with him. Riddle slapped a twenty-dollar bill on the bar and began to order round after round for the three of them. Jake began to get glassy-eyed by the time Eileen returned to sing again.

As she left the floor, Riddle grabbed a passing redhead and swung her out to dance. But down at the back end of the floor, he left her to knife through the throng. He overtook Eileen in the corridor just as she turned into her room. In the dimness, he held her tight a long moment. Then he told her they were getting out.

"No, Clem! Not till I've found Jeff and—"

He shook her by the shoulders. "Listen. I've made a deal with Priest himself." He told her about that. "So I can come back and walk Jeff out to safety. Do you see?"

Her fingers clutched his arm. "Clem, I've heard the men talking about Joe Best. They say he's a killer and—"

"Honey, Best is my problem. Be out back around three in the morning. And try to get some men's clothes if you can." Then he left her as footsteps came from the rear.

Back at the bar he kept setting up fresh drinks. When it came time for them to go out into the stiff night wind, Jake was lurching and the gunman was none too steady. They went up a broad alley past cabins.

"Remember," Jake cautioned thickly. "Best is snake fast. And don't miss often, neither. In Ricon, he hangs out in Big Dan's bar."

"I savvy," Riddle said as they moved into moonglow. Ahead there was one of the pole corrals of the camp over against the gulch wall, with a large horse shed nearby.

"He's been hanging out down there, sorta tauntin' Priest to come down and get him," Jake went on. "Priest almost went a coupla times. You happened along at a plumb ripe moment. Uh-huh." He took down a lantern from a nail inside the shed and lighted it.

They saddled up Riddle's roan and led the animal outside. The hatchet-faced one came along the path. He had stopped off at Jake's place. He had Clem Riddle's gunbelt and the hideout shoulder rig, with both guns. Riddle made no move to take them. Jake asked what was the matter.

"I'm going to need a second pony, saddled up," Riddle told him bluntly. He ignored the sudden suspicion that jumped into Jake's eyes. "Best has pards with him down there. I might have to bust the breeze with 'em on my coattails. So I aim to have along a fresh pony—at least one that hasn't been ridden."

Jake pulled at his beard and the hatchet-faced one pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. Riddle shrugged.

"I know how to work it. I've gone into more 'n one salty pueblo after a tough jasper before, in my time. I know." That last was true enough. "Or mebbeso you'd like me to pay you for the extra cayuse!"

Jake went in then and saddled up a pinto. Clem Riddle strapped on his guns. They both shook hands with him, wished him good luck. He headed out, leading the pinto horse. As he left the last shack behind he swung into a gallop and, for more than a mile, maintained it, knowing they'd be listening.

Finally he pulled up beside a stand of scrawny cottonwoods. Dismounting, he ground-anchored the ponies under cover of the trees. Then, hugging the shadows of the Gulch wall, he started back. He finally got up beside a darkened cabin, scanning the street, his pulses hammering a little. If he were discovered back here now, the game would be up. But he had to get Eileen out of that hellhole.

HE WORKED along some distance behind the buildings on that side of the Gulch's road. Three men appeared abruptly, and Riddle dropped to his knees, hunched behind an all-too-small clump of browned grass on a hummock. They couldn't miss him when they came abreast. Then shots spattered out down by one of the whisky mills as a brawl started. The trio turned and ran down toward it. Riddle ducked across the path and into some high weeds.

Down behind the dancehall, he had to race across a big patch of moonlight. Then he crept in toward the rear door, the refrain of the crude music drifting out to him. Once he froze as that door opened and a tall man stood in it, surveying the night. Finally he went away, shutting the door. Riddle got within ten yards of the back of the building and still saw no sign of Eileen. Then he heard his name called softly.

"Clem! Here."

She moved out from a lopsided boulder over to his left, a ludicrous little figure in green velvet Mexican pants and a man's coat, several sizes too big. A slouch hat, jammed low, hid her yellow hair. As he moved quickly over beside her, his gun out, Clem Riddle forgot all caution, all discretion. He took her in his arms and held her tight. His face went down to hers.

When he finally released her the blood was roaring in his temples and his left hand was vised around his Colts. Heaven help anybody who tried to stop him now when he was taking her out of this.

They did encounter one man on the way out. But he was so orey-eyed as he stumbled along he failed to recognize Clem Riddle even in that open moon-dyed patch. Then they were close against the Gulch wall, moving through masking jackpine and brush down to the clump of cottonwoods. Mounted, they walked the ponies some distance before swinging into a gallop. When they stopped briefly

for Riddle to tighten the cinch on the girl's pony, she said suddenly, clutching at his hand:

"Clem, honey, let—let's give it up! Yes. It's all so crazy. Jeff got himself into this. And I don't want you—" her voice broke a moment with emotion— "you to risk meeting this killer, Best, and then going *back* into that nest of lobos. Please. Let's."

He looked up into the great dark eyes, aware of how much the words cost the proud girl. He knew then she really loved him. But he shook his head.

"I've drawn chips. I sit in till the jackpot, Eileen."

It was quite early in the morning when, with the mouth of the Gulch behind them, they forked into the somnolent little range town of Ricon. It was a sprawled out place on the flats, sun-scorched and dreary, straggling along a main stem and a couple of side streets. The one prosperous-looking building in it was the stageline depot with its fresh coat of paint. Across the road from it was a drab little eating place run by a Chinese. Clem Riddle and the woman ate some breakfast there, though she was nervous and barely touched her food.

He drew deep on a quirly, eyes taking in every detail of her beauty to stamp it on his memory in case he was never to see her again. Then he gave her strict instructions. She was to wait here. If there was a gunfight and he did not return, she was to take the next stage down to the rail point some thirty odd miles eastward. From there she could get home to Little Brazos by train.

"All right, Clem," she said in a very small voice, holding his hand tightly.

He bent to brush her cheek with his lips, then he went out, the screen door banging behind him. Up along the main stem he went, walking stiff-legged. Big Dan's bar was in the next block, a typical cowtown saloon, the counter empty at that hour.

Riddle bought a drink and stood before it, burning down quirly after quirly. A couple of men came in, had a snort, left. Little nerves like taut wires jerked at the back of his neck. Then he finally put it to the fat-faced sleepy-eyed barkeep.

"Looking for a friend of mine, fella by the name of Joe Best." He saw the barman's face go blank. Riddle described Best. But the other just shook his head stupidly. Riddle knew. A smart gent didn't do too much tongue-wagging about a man like Best.

Riddle brought out a ten-spot and slid it slowly halfway across the counter. "It's a heck of a note when an old pard sends for you—then don't show up himself. 'Specially when he's promised you a job. In the old days, Joe always used to keep his word."

THE barkeep scratched his head. "Now it seems to me I heard somebody say they was a fella by that name over at the boarding house. Just up the side road. It's a big yella house." His hand engulfed the bill. "By the way, pilgrim, if you ain't Best's pard really, you'll find trouble a-plenty. Don't say I didn't warn ya."

But Riddle was already breasting the batwings. He found the big yellow house a couple of hundred yards up the side street. Then he went back to the main stem and got his roan. Returning to the side street, he ground-anchored it up beyond the boarding house. Then he sauntered back till opposite the place when he cut into the path of the porch quickly. He was as soft-footed as a padding cat as he went up on it and tried the door. It opened. A smell of cooking wafted from the rear of the house as he glided into the hall.

A reedy voice called, "Who's there? Somebody come in?"

Riddle darted halfway up the carpeted stairs and froze against the wall as footsteps sounded from a back room. "Somebody come in?" said the reedy voice from the end of the hall. Then, "Oh, drat it!" And the footsteps went away into the rear again. Riddle moved on upward, shoving his flat gray hat back on his shoulders as he neared the level of the second floor hall. He took another step up and glimpsed a stocky man turning away from a half-open door, swinging a pair of handcuffs.

"All right, Best," the man was saying. "Climb into your pants. Time we was gitting outside." And he came along the hall toward Riddle.

Riddle hunched down on the stairs again. And as the man neared the head of the stairs, he sprang up, gun jutting. "Keep your jaw buttoned," he warned in a whisper.

The stocky jasper blinked, half reached, then halted the movement. Rid-

dle sprang up to the top beside him, ordered him to face the wall. In a vague way, the ex-deputy wondered about the handcuffs, but there was no time to get the answer to that now. Riddle chopped his gun barrel down sharply over the other's head, caught his body as he sank to ease him quietly to the floor. Then he darted down the hall to the partially opened door.

A sputtering sound came from the room. Inside, gaunt in his underwear and bare feet, Long Joe Best was splashing water from the basin into his face. Beyond him, over the back of a chair, were his rusty black coat and pants. Hooked beside them was his gunbelt with the two Colts with the gold stars inlaid in the butts.

Clem Riddle toed the door open wider and called softly:

"All right, Best! I'll give you a chance. Fill your hand!" Somehow, even though the man was a sidewinder, Riddle had to give him a chance.

Best wheeled his lank form quickly, blinking against the water in his eyes. He had a certain resemblance to a skinny buzzard. His lips peeled back in surprise to reveal the two flashing gold teeth. There was no question of his identity then. He nodded slowly.

"I might have known Priest would git a man through somehow," he said in a thin dry voice with an air of fatalism.

Riddle started to holster his hogleg. "Fill your hand, Best. I'm giving you a chance."

Peter Priest's former lieutenant stared unbelieving for a long moment. Then he shook his small head. "Ain't got no shells. Them smokepoles is empty." He saw that Riddle thought he was lying. Best shrugged, went over to the chair, drew a gun from the holster, taking the stock gingerly by thumb and forefinger. He bent and skidded it along the floor to Riddle in the doorway.

Suspecting a trick, Riddle snapped his Colts level again. "Don't yelp for help—or it'll be echoing in Hell," he warned. Then he snatched up the gold-starred weapon. A glance told him Best wasn't lying. The gun was empty. And so were the loops in the shell belt over on the chair.

Riddle couldn't understand it. Unconsciously he let his gun nose drop. He couldn't bring himself to blast down an unarmed man and yet—

LONG JOE BEST made his play. One hand streaked up behind his neck. And then the blade of a Bowie knife, plucked from a sheath hung between his shoulder blades, was slicing like a splinter of silver lightning across the bedroom. Riddle just hunched enough to save himself. The thrown knife did slit open his shirt just above the shoulder. He saw Best twisting toward the rumpled bed where he apparently had another hidden. Clem Riddle's gun coughed harshly.

Best's long body buckled over, hung that way as he swayed. Watching, Riddle took a step backward out the doorway. One of the killer's hands dropped from his chest, red-stained. A bubbling, moaning sound came from him. Then he half straightened and Riddle could see the hole in his chest and knew the job was done. He stuffed Best's gold-starred gun inside his waistband as the mortally hit man collapsed on the bed. Riddle turned toward the rear of the house at a sound.

"Hoist them dewclaws, lobo—or get drilled!" a voice barked from behind him at the front end of the upstairs hall. "Hoist 'em!" And a slug fanned close by his head in warning.

He twisted a look over his shoulder. Two men had stepped from a room up there, their drawn guns covering him. He had no choice. His hands went up. And then he turned at their order, peering through the acrid gunsmoke drifting from the dead Best's room. One of them was as broad as a barn door with a big red beak of a nose jutting from a curiously flat face. Clem Riddle knew at once he had met that gent somewhere in the past. But he couldn't place him.

"We ought to drill you where you stand," snapped the flat-faced one, jerking his two big Colt Pattersons angrily. "By grab, we oughta, you dirty killing snake! A man who'd kill for dinero! All right. Drop that gun quick and—" He started for Riddle, cocking back one of his gun hammers.

Riddle figured his ticket to Boothill was already punched. These would be some of those gun-slick pards he was warned Best had with him. He let his Colts thud to the floor, got ready for a desperate play from the shoulder rig beneath his vest.

"Freeze in your tracks—or you get it in the back!" a woman cried tensely.

And Eileen Fardow, holding a short-barreled .32 very steadily, appeared at the head of the stairs behind the two who'd jumped Clem Riddle.

The pair half turned, hesitating. And Riddle dropped to a knee, regained his Colts, and had the drop on them from that side as well. He barked at the pair to claw for the ceiling fast. They did.

He relieved them of their hardware, shoved them into the room from which they'd come, took the key from the inside of the door, locked it from the outside. He grabbed Eileen by the arm and they ran down the stairs. The little bespectacled owner of the boarding house was cowering down at the back of the hall. Ignoring him, they hustled outside. Every second was precious. It was a good bet more of Joe Best's gunmen pards were around.

When Riddle saw her pinto up the line ground-anchored beside his own roan, where she'd had the foresight to take her animal, his face broke in a brief grin. He hugged her by the shoulders.

"Honey, you sure are one danged smart gun-woman."

CHAPTER IV

Nearing the Test

A FEW moments later they were in the kak and pounding on up the side street and out onto the brush-dotted flats beyond. It was about an hour later, when they had settled to a steady gallop, that it came to him, the identity of the flat-faced man with the red hook of nose. Eileen remembered his looks. Riddle said:

"I knew I'd crossed his trail afore. It was about six years back—up Norcross way. He was Ab Owens, a U. S. marshal. I'd swear it." It didn't make sense though. It sounded locoed.

Their ponies began to wilt as the hot afternoon wore away. They paused at a rocky spring to water them, dropping from the saddle themselves to stretch their legs. Eileen was nervous though she strove not to show it. The real test, getting her brother, Jeff, out of Priest's Gulch, would come now.

"Clem, do you think Priest will really let him go?"

He patted her shoulder as he indicated the gun of the dead Joe Best in his waistband. "Priest always keeps a deal. Don't worry." And he started to tell her of his plans for her when he glanced over his shoulder back down the gulch. He stopped talking. Some distance back, up against the background of the steely blue sky above the gulch sides, hung a small cloud of trail dust. It meant pursuit.

"What, Clem?" she prompted.

He rolled the cold stub of cigaret across his mouth. By the size of that slow-shifting patch of dust in the sky he knew it meant a big bunch was coming up the gulch, riding hard. Apparently Long Joe Best had had more gun pards with him than Priest had suspected. Riddle swung the girl toward her saddle. All plans to get her to a place of safety were out of the question now. Those killers would pick up their trail. She would be safe no place he might leave her alone. Priest's outlaw town was their only haven.

"Looks like somebody resented my putting lead in Best," he said with dry humor. "Even snakes have friends, I reckon. We got to ride for it."

They pushed on hard. But their horses were spent. It was rough going along the uneven rock-strewn gulch bottom with its stretches of soft sand. The westering sun was already out of sight beyond the gulch lip when Riddle studied the back trail again a half hour later. That low-hanging pall of dust had gotten considerably closer. The ex-deputy was not worried about himself—a man could always go down shooting when he was cornered. But if that coyote pack got their hands on Eileen—

Some time later, after a long straight stretch in the gulch, Riddle again glanced back as they rounded a bend. A few miles to the rear, dimly seen through the dust kicked up by their own ponies, he made out a single rider who'd evidently been sent ahead of the main bunch. Riddle's mouth buttoned up grimly. If worst came to worst, he would have to send her on ahead while he held them off with his short guns from some barricade of rocks. He called to her to spur harder but her pinto horse was already stumbling frequently.

He himself was actually surprised when their heaving ponies with sweat-wet flanks carried them around another bend as the day waned and they sighted that clump of cottonwoods where he'd left the ponies last night after first quitting the outlaw town. The little cloud of trail dust in the rear seemed to have halted. They swung into the patch of trees. Riddle gripped the girl hard by the shoulders.

"Now, honey, this time—stay here! No matter what happens," he told her sternly. He explained that if she came into the town, it would only make more trouble. He would have the problem of slipping her out again as well as getting Jeff free. He didn't say so but he also figured there was a big gun battle in the making. "Stay here! I'll get Jeff out. And then we'll work around somehow and come back here for you."

"All right, Clem," she agreed.

"Stay here!" he said again, shaking her a little. "Nobody'd think of looking in here for you." Then he kissed her quickly, a little roughly. And he was back in the saddle, swinging up over the little hump that brought him in sight of Priest's Gulch, a stony-eyed slouching figure, whistling as he rode.

THE bearded Jake yelled out to him from the dancehall doorway as he sloped up the ragged street. "Holy Pete, you're back—alive! Did—"

Riddle nodded, tapping the gold-starred gun butt projecting from the waistband of his gray trousers. He rode straight on to the barroom at the other end that was Peter Priest's headquarters. The hatchet-faced one waved to him from the doorway as he dropped off.

"Where's the other pony?" he asked.

Riddle shrugged, coming up the steps. "Best had a heap of trigger-proddy friends down there. And when lead starts to fly, it don't make no exceptions of horseflesh. Want me to pay for the pinto?" he threw insolently over his shoulder as he marched in.

This time, Priest back down there behind the table wasn't eating. He had just finished and sat picking his teeth the while belches rumbled from his great carcass. His tiny shrewd eyes scoured Riddle as he came down the room.

"You're back—and walking on your hind legs," he said.

Riddle sneered. "Don't sound so sad about it, Priest." And he tossed the gold-starred gun on the table. It jounced over against a couple of .45's to the left of Priest on the table. The latter grabbed it up, eyed it closely, thumb-rubbing the inlaid star on the butt. A smile crept around his greasy mouth.

"It's Joe Best's gun all right— Uh-huh. Tell me about it, Riddle. You have much trouble." He planted his elbows on the table, pushing the sombrero slightly to the right side of his tin plate.

Riddle gave him a brief outline of what had happened, sitting down and glancing around idly. But he was checking on the men in the room. There was nobody behind the bar counter. A couple of gents leaned against it as they took in the story. There was the hatchet-faced one by the front door. And a half bald gunslinger stood to one side of Priest's chair. The latter rubbed his hands in enjoyment as he listened to how Joe Best died.

"And now I expect you to live up to your promise, Priest. We made a deal," Riddle concluded.

Priest's face went coldly blank. "Riddle, last night after you left, a woman disappeared from this camp."

Clem Riddle cursed drily, like a man irritated by some unimportant irrelevant detail. "Sure, when I go hunting a killer, I drag some skirt along just to clutter up things. I ain't got enough on my hands. Why, you lunkhead—did you ask me to get Joe Best—or stay here and ride herd on the hussies in your corral?"

The half-bald gunman came away from the wall with a jerk. Priest's mouth folded to a lipless seam. Then he grinned, nodding. "You don't swallow crow for nobody, do you, Riddle? I like that. Y'know, you could have a real big future a-working here for me? If—"

"I want my man, Priest."

"Sure. Sure, Riddle. Keep your britches on. But I could use you. And good dinero in it for you, too. Joe Best was one of my lieutenants. They had my other right-hand man, Cutter Masters, behind the bars up in Norcross. But Cutter escaped. Now with you and him to help me rod this spread—"

Clem Riddle didn't miss the significance of the words about Masters. But he gave no sign. He repeated, "I want my man, Priest."

Priest nodded. "All right, who is he? Name him and—" A big, black-browed, slope-shouldered hombre stepped from a

room in the back into the barroom. Priest turned to him. "Have a good sleep, Cutter?"

Clem Riddle had only a split-second warning. Big Masters started to yawn. Then his yellow-flecked eyes came to Riddle, bulged, jerked to slits in the yellowish glow of the lamp on the table.

"Holy mackerel, Pete!" he roared, pawing for a holster. "That—that's Riddle, the Hellfire Deputy from Norcross! By thunder—"

Riddle's gun, the one snaked from his hidden shoulder rig, barked in the low-ceiled room. Cutter Masters stumbled backward, his right arm smashed by the bullet. And the ex-deputy of Norcross, his chair crashing over, stood straddle-legged as he leaped out of it backward. Then he hit a trigger again as he saw the hatchet-faced one up by the door dragging a Colts. Hatchet Face staggered through the batwings with a chunk of lead in his side.

NO GUNS answered his as the thunder of the reports ceased. He had the room under his thrall. Priest sat unmoving, face shiny with sudden sweat, but calm-looking. Riddle threw words at him, keeping one eye cocked on those guns at Priest's left.

"You're the man I'm taking outa here now, Priest," he told him. It was the only way he could have a chance of getting out alive himself. "Get moving, Priest—but slow and easy. And hands up! And anybody makes a play—you get a hideful of lead pronto!" He raised his voice on that last so it could be heard in the street, knowing the gun reports would have men piling that way. "Slow and easy, Priest—if you crave to stay alive."

Priest started to lift his great hulk from the chair. His left hand shifted inch by inch toward the guns. Riddle saw it, shook his head warningly. And then Priest's right hand jumped and the hat on the table was flipped over. And that hand was around the Colts that had lain hidden under the sombrero. Quick as a cat despite his size, Priest fired without bringing the gun off the table, fired as rapidly and casually as a man would strike a match. One of Riddle's guns boomed almost at the same instant.

But Peter Priest was one of those natural born gun slingers. His bullet took Riddle in the right leg, ripping through the flesh on the side. The ex-deputy went backward, stumbling, down to one knee. He saw, through the gunsmoke, Priest knocked against the wall, slammed back by that bullet in his left shoulder. And then the whole place was a-yammer with the smash of shots as the others in the bar drew.

Riddle knew he had to get out of there fast. He put a shot through the chimney of the lamp and the wick flame was extinguished. Outside of a shaft of light from over the batwing doors, the room lay in gloom thickened by the powder smoke. He hobbled behind a post. They weren't certain where he was. The wounded Priest roared curses at them to get Riddle. And the latter, knowing he had to keep moving, swung back to a side window whose shutters were closed. He hammered at them with a gun. They flew open. And he doubled and hurdled through, thankful there was no glass at all.

He smacked into the wall of the close-by general store beside the barroom, landed sitting in the narrow dim alley. It looked as if, by a whim of Fate, he had lost the jackpot hand. He went forward hurriedly, though limping, to make a try for his pony. He even got out of the alley and onto the path beside the street. And then a back blast out of the pit itself seemed to flare up in his teeth.

CHAPTER V

Showdown with Lead

THEY were experienced hands at the technique of street gunfighting, those denizens of Priest's Gulch. They were behind trees, just inside doorways across the road. Two who'd been on the barroom steps, unable to do anything when he had the drop on Priest, had dropped down behind the other end of the steps. All of them opened up when he stepped from the cover of the alley. It was little short of a miracle Clem Riddle wasn't killed in his tracks.

But as the first slug whined by, he dropped flat and rolled against the other end of the steps. He came up on a knee.

And even as he was about to fire along the steps at the pair at the other end of them, one of them rolled backward slowly with a hole in his forehead. The shot had come from behind Riddle. He triggered at the other one, forcing him to duck down from sight. Riddle began to back like a crab into the alley again. And as he did he shot a look the other way down the road whence that aiding shot had come.

It seemed as if it must be a mirage, at first. For there was big handsome Jeff Fardow himself, the man Riddle had come in to save. He had just ridden in and dropped off his pony beyond the store, waiting to see what the gunfire meant.

"Clem!" he bawled. He raced toward him, throwing a couple of shots at the gunmen across the road as he ran. Another moment and he was beside the wounded Clem Riddle in the alley.

"Whole town's after me," Riddle gasped. There was no time for further explanation then. And there was only one next move. To try to get out the back end of the alley. They moved toward it, Riddle sending a bullet through one of the half-closed shutters of the side barroom window.

They got out in the back. There was yelling from down the line, somebody bellowing they were headed out behind the buildings. Clem Riddle looked at the cabins strung out a few hundred feet away at a tangent off to the left. But with his bullet-ripped leg, they could never make it without being cut down. Then Jeff Fardow tapped his shoulder and pointed to the open back door of the store next to the barroom. Bent low, they hurried to it and stepped into the storeroom of the place, just as the fat, puffing, weak-eyed store-keeper himself hustled in from the front, gripping a carbine.

Riddle was on him like a wildcat, but not shooting. He whipped a gun down across the hand holding the carbine. The storekeeper dropped it with a yelp of pain, and Riddle had a gun in his back the next moment.

"Get in that doorway, Pop!" he ordered. "And if they ask you, we ain't in here. We ran out to one of the cabins! *Sabe?* Or would you like to be a hero—a dead one?"

The terrified man obeyed, stepping into the doorway. Crouched behind him, Riddle saw men burst from an alley. They shouted at the storekeeper. He worked his mouth and pointed out toward the cabins strewn out behind there. The shouting redoubled and more men poured from the road to swing toward the cabins.

They herded the storeman back inside. And it was Jeff who bent his gun barrel over the gent's head, dropping him behind a crate to silence him. Riddle said, "The ponies," and they moved to the front door. And then they saw. Every cayuse had been cleared from the road. And just when Clem Riddle thought he might still win and snake Jeff out.

A shot whizzed at them from a doorway down the line. Jeff Fardow had a panicked look as he realized they were trapped afoot. And then the ingenious ex-deputy yanked at his arm as he headed for the front door of the barroom. It was a longshot gamble. But Priest and the men inside there thought they had fled out into the rear.

IT WORKED. They slid up the steps hurriedly. Jeff Fardow husked, "Clem, where's Eileen? Outside this hole? Thank heaven!" Then they were peering in under the half-leaf doors.

The lamp had been lighted again. They could see figures at the rear, peering out the back door, watching the hunt for them. Riddle went in first. He was halfway down the bar when a board creaked loudly under his foot. The huge-bodied Priest and the gunman with him at the back door started to turn. Riddle coldly pumped two bullets between their heads.

He could have killed Priest. But Priest dead would have been worth nothing. Priest alive, in his hands, could be used as a hostage. Both Priest and the gun slick pushed up their hands, then wheeled slowly. Peter Priest went the color of putty and his huge jowls shook with fury when he saw who had returned.

"Close that back door and bar it!" Riddle ordered hoarsely. "Then come this way. And I'll blast down the first fool who makes a play!"

It was the gun slick who carried out the order for barring the door. Then the pair came forward into the barroom. Priest managed a sneer.

"Riddle, do you really think you'll ride outa the Gulch alive?" he asked. His sly eyes flicked over to the other side of the room once.

Riddle followed them. All he saw was an empty chair against the wall over in the shadows. He answered. "If I don't —you'll be buzzard bait, Priest. You're telling your men to stay back and pen their guns—or you get your chips cashed." He knew those shots would bring the gun pack swarming back.

Priest shook his big head slowly. "Ride the trigger when you're ready, Riddle. I ain't giving no orders like that. But kill me—and my men'll tear you limb from limb, by grab!"

Something about the way he said it told Clem Riddle that Priest wasn't fooling. That he meant it very grimly. It was a case of bluff against bluff. Priest was gambling on the fact that Riddle knew if he killed him his own fate would be sealed.

Riddle gave him his answer, a savage answer, with another shot. The bullet whispered so close to Priest's head he turned ashen. Again his eyes seemed to slide to something off to one side of Riddle. Riddle figured it was a trick to get him to look around so Priest could go for a hideout weapon. There was fresh shouting in the rear and the drum of boots swinging back to the barroom. Riddle said:

"Priest, the next one is going to carve a hole in your flesh. And I got plenty more slugs in my belt. So—"

There was a shot from the front of the barroom. A hoarse, choked curse of pain. Riddle and Jeff Fardow whipped about. A couple of yards behind Riddle, Cutter Masters staggered sideward, blood spurting from a hole in his left arm. The knife he'd held, that he had been about to bury in Clem Riddle's back, rattled to the floor. And beyond him, by the batwing doors, stood the yellow-haired Eileen holding a smoking .32.

"I had to come in to warn you, Clem," she said very meekly, "when I saw those gunmen from Ricon moving up the Gulch."

Riddle had already wheeled back to cover Priest as the latter worked a double-barrelled derringer from an inside pocket. Priest dropped it and Eileen went on hurriedly. She said there was a big pack of them and they were getting ready to hit the town.

Clem Riddle's mouth twisted. Eileen had saved his hide, he knew. It had taken courage for her to come in. He realized that, too. And yet, for her sake, he wished she hadn't. It was going to be tougher than ever, when this gun brawl erupted, to have a woman on their hands. Somebody began to pound on the back door. The ex-deputy hobbled toward the front one to close it so they could make a stand.

A fierce, thunderous burst of gunfire came from the other end of the road. Hit men screamed. Riddle thrust his head through the batwings, prepared for the worst. A band of horsemen was pouring into the place. And in the thinning light he caught the glitter of marshal's stars on their shirts.

The lead rider reined in to pour lead down an alley, then came on down the line. It was the flat-faced man with the hook of fiery-red nose who'd been in the Ricon boarding house with Joe Best, the man Riddle had later recalled as Ab Owens, U. S. marshal.

CLEM RIDDLE saw then, though he couldn't understand it. This was a raid of U. S. marshals. They had come to clean out this rathole. He leaped out on the steps as Ab Owens, marshal's badge plain on his coat, drove nearer. Riddle lifted his arms, calling him by name.

"Clem Riddle!" yelled Owens, leaning from the saddle. "Thought I recognized you back in Ricon but it didn't seem possible. Do you know where Priest himself's holed up?"

Riddle leaned against the front wall and rolled the charred stub of cold quirly across his face. He jerked his head toward the inside, suddenly very weary.

"We got the big pin inside, Owens."

Out in the brush around the cabins a gun still crashed occasionally. But the clean-up job was almost completed. Most of the denizens of Priest's Gulch, those whose chips hadn't been cashed, were herded under guard down in the dance-hall. This time, because they'd been jumped while Clem Riddle was staging a one-man war in their midst, they had not been able to make a vicious stand and then fade back into the trackless maze of the labyrinth of defiles running off from the Gulch side.

In the little bullet-pocked barroom, the handcuffed Priest sat slouched behind his table. There was no grub stacked on it now though. Clem Riddle, who caused his downfall, sat across from him, his bullet-ripped leg already bandaged up

and a drink before him. Jeff Fardow, clutching his sister's arm as if he'd never let her go again, had already told his story.

Looping around in the country north of Little Brazos to head for this place, he had changed his mind and determined to return and face the music like a man. When he got back, of course, he learned the man he'd slain in a card game was a wanted killer, that there was no charge against him. And then, from Mathilda, the old housekeeper out at the ranch, he'd discovered his sister, Eileen, had headed for Priest's Gulch. And he had come to get her out.

There was a lull. A man's voice came down the night, yelping that he'd surrender. Priest shifted in the chair and muttered sullenly: "I need some grub. Yuh wouldn't starve a man, would you?"

Nobody paid any attention. Riddle looked up at Ab Owens as the latter poured himself a fresh snort of redeye. "I still don't savvy how you drew chips, Owens. Not that I wasn't danged glad to see you!"

The marshal chuckled. "It's pretty simple. After Joe Best tried to grab control here from that fat swine," indicating Priest with a nod, "and had to run out, we picked him up down the line. We'd got something on Priest at last. Found out that some eighteen years ago he was in on the robbery of a U. S. mail car in a train holdup in which a man was killed. So we brought Best back to Ricon and used him as bait."

Posing as gun slicks themselves, the marshals had hoped to lure out Priest himself. They had grabbed off the three men Priest had sent to get Best. They hoped that Priest himself, driven by his thirst for vengeance against any man who doublecrossed him, would finally come.

"Then you sashayed in, Riddle, and kinda messed up our plans." The marshal put a match to a stogie. "So we decided to gamble and hit this camp. Don't know as we'd have had much success if it hadn't been for you, Riddle. Priest's Gulch has been purged. And you made it possible."

Clem Riddle flushed slightly, embarrassed by the praise. He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Eileen, who had moved over to stand beside him. Her gesture seemed to second the marshal's statement.

"Let's take this big fat polecat down with the others," Owens said to a deputy marshal. "He pollutes the air here."

Clem Riddle looked up at the yellow-haired girl and tried to make his eyes stern. "You and me are stepping outside too, lady. Twice—twice, mind you—you disobeyed my orders." He hoisted himself from the chair, took her hand, and hobbled toward the back door. "You, you need a good spanking, by grab. . . ."

196 PAGES OF SIX-GUN THRILLS

Featuring three top-flight action novels by the West's most famous writers—
THE KILLER, a Frontier Thriller by STEWART EDWARD WHITE; SIX FEET FOUR, an Exciting Action Yarn, by JACKSON GREGORY, and THE BARBER OF TUBAC, a Slug-Slamming Saga by NELSON C. NYE

IN THE GALA WINTER ISSUE OF

TRIPLE WESTERN

NOW ON SALE—ONLY 25c PER COPY AT ALL STANDS!

Jim Bowen triggered a shot at Avery

TANGLE FOOT

By CHUCK MARTIN

Outlaw lead had crippled Deputy Jim Bowen's leg—but the same lead had sharpened his wits and his aim!

JIM BOWEN was a big man any way you looked at him. Two hundred pounds standing up, sitting down, or in the saddle, he always squared his wide shoulders back and carried his head high. He was a man of many accomplishments and few words, and the stamp of the West was upon him like the brand and ear-markings on a range steer.

Jim Bowen wasn't old when measured by years, but wide experience had left its mark. He looked to be forty and had just passed his twenty-eighth birthday. Salt-and-pepper flecked his black hair at the temples, and deep-set gray eyes seemed to look right through a man to find the hidden answers.

There was something else about Jim Bowen. The deep lines around his mouth had been etched by pain, and the conquering of this pain had added to Bowen's character. The sign in front of his little shop was the only one of its kind in Texas, or perhaps in all the wide spaces of the great West. It said simply:

JAMES BOWEN
COBBLER AND RANGE DETECTIVE!

Jim Bowen hadn't always mended boots and shoes, but it was a good vocation for a cripple. San Angelo had known him as a fearless peace officer, but that had been before the Ryder gang had left Oklahoma for the Lone Star State.

Bowen glanced up from his bench when the little bell over his screen door announced a caller. The newcomer was Sheriff Sam Ball, and he smiled when Bowen reached to a drawer, fumbled for the badge of a special deputy sheriff, and pinned it to his vest. His eyes studied Sheriff Ball briefly, but Jim Bowen asked no questions.

"You've just rode in from the Adobe Wall country, you've been out several days, and you didn't catch those bandits who held up the Wells, Fargo stage," he told Ball quietly. "I'll saddle my horse and ride out there with you!"

"Don't know how you do it, Jim," the sheriff muttered. "I wish you'd close this shop and come back as my chief deputy again."

"I make nearly as much now and I have time for my studies this way," Bowen said with a little smile. "You've got a Wells, Fargo tag in your vest pocket, red dust all over your boots, and you haven't shaved for three days. How much did they get?"

"Ten thousand dollars," the sheriff admitted wryly. "They wounded Pop Stiles, the driver. There were three in this holdup, all strangers to Pop. Thought mebbe you could tell something if you could read the sign out yonder."

Jim Bowen stood up and took off a light leather apron. He wore custom-made calfskin boots for an obvious reason. His left foot flopped awkwardly as he made his way through the back door of the little shop, but out in the little barn, behind the shop, Jim Bowen reached for an ingenious device and fastened it around the calf of his leg under his grey wool pants.

Sheriff Ball watched Bowen buckle the brace tightly in place. When the cobbler stood erect, the injured foot seemed almost normal. But Ball noticed that lines of pain had deepened on Bowen's face, and he knew the reason why. Bowen's leg and ankle had been shattered by outlaw bullets, and he only wore the brace when duty called him away from his cobbler's shop.

Bowen entered the barn, saddled his deep-chested Morgan horse, and swung up to the saddle. He wore a brace of .41 caliber Bisley Colts in the holsters of his crossed gun-belts, and the saddle-bags behind his cantle bulged with an assortment of articles needed in his business.

A PRETTY girl came through the store as Bowen was about to ride out to join the sheriff in the street. The cobbler stopped his horse and took off his gray Stetson. He spoke with the deep drawl of a born Texan.

"Morning, Betty June; you'll look after the shop while I'm riding with the law?"

"Must you go again, Jim?" the girl asked. "I'll watch the shop. Do be careful. It might be another trap to kill you!"

"I'll be careful, honey," Bowen promised. "And I'll be back before sundown."

Betty June Hollister reached for Bowen's left hand and held it tightly as she searched his face. Things had been different for Jim before he had been wounded so grievously, but they were still just the same with Betty June.

"You killed Jud Ryder, and captured two of his gang," she reminded. "Three escaped, and they sent word they would kill you. Please don't go out there, Jim!"

Bowen stiffened in the saddle. He glanced down at the heavy brace on his left leg, and his face hardened. His right hand touched the grips of his gun, and his nostrils flared wide.

"I'm hoping they'll try, Betty June," he answered huskily. "I've waited three years, and I can't go to the mountain. Mebbe so the mountain will come to me. See you at sundown!"

Sam Ball stopped on the west bank of Prouder Creek and pointed with his left hand. He held a thirty-thirty saddle-gun in his right, and Jim Bowen listened attentively.

"Pop Stiles was tooling his four-horse hitch across the ford yonder," the sheriff began. "Those three banditos rode out of the brush and told Pop to elevate. Pop he makes a grab for the sawed-off shotgun on the box beside him, and the tall hold-up man shoots Pop in the right shoulder. Knocked him kicking off the seat, and they took the strong-box and

high-tailed!"

The sheriff described the outlaws, but Jim Bowen shook his head. They might have been any three roving cowboys mounted on fast horses. Bowen seldom forgot a face or a picture, and he had a list of wanted men numbering several hundred.

"I'll circle for signs," he told the sheriff, and swung to the ground. "The trail is four days old," he complained. Then his eyes lighted up as he knelt beside some marks in the moist red soil.

"Like as not they've high-tailed back to Oklahoma," Ball said heavily, and Bowen knew that the sheriff was thinking about the Ryder gang.

Jim Bowen reached to his saddle-bags and brought out some packages. The sheriff watched while Bowen mixed plaster and took some imprints of boot-marks. He also made some measurements, put them down in a little black book, and nodded his head.

"Keep an eye peeled for a big skinny jasper," he warned the sheriff. "He'll be about six-foot-three, a hundred and sixty pounds, and he wears a number twelve boot. He's a left-handed hombre, smokes cornhusk quirlies, and packs a Bowie knife on the right side of his belt!"

Sam Ball stared and rubbed his stubbled chin.

"How the devil can you tell all that?" he demanded gruffly.

"By reading the sign he left," Jim Bowen answered quietly. "It's all right there on the ground. This jasper should be somewhere around thirty years old. He's quick as a cat!"

"Mebbe so you can tell me his name," the sheriff said with a grimace.

Jim Bowen nodded, but he wasn't smiling. "Yeah," he said. "Mebbe I could."

"Well, spell it out, Jim!" Ball pleaded. "Sorry I disbelieved you, after I've seen you work before. You know this hold-up's handle?"

"From the description I gave you, he sounds like Lefty Slim Connors from Oklahoma," Bowen stated positively. "I saw his name on a list last month. He's wanted in Tulsa for robbery and murder. And that ain't all, Sam. He's a cousin to Joe Ryder!"

"Naw!" Sheriff Ball growled. "Joe Ryder, the outlaw who crippled you before you killed him three years ago!"

He bit his lip when he saw the spasm of pain which passed swiftly over Jim Bowen's face. But Bowen forced a smile as he eased his injured leg out in front of him. Then he began to talk again.

"This second hombre is a little jasper about five feet five," he told the puzzled sheriff. "Wears spike heels three inches high, a pair of Peacemaker .45s, and chews tobacco. Shorty will be about forty-five, and he's got six notches whittled on the handles of his meat gun!"

"On his right-hand six-shooter, eh?" Sam Ball said thoughtfully. "You know his handle?" he asked hopefully.

"It's Till Avery, but they call him 'Tiny' and he's a fast gun-swift," Bowen answered quietly. "That one's easy; he's a saddle-pard to Lefty Connors. I don't know about the third man; he must have sat on his horse all the time!"

"I'll notify all the sheriffs in Texas and Oklahoma," Sam Ball promised grimly, and he frowned when Jim Bowen shook his head.

"They were back here this morning, Sam," Bowen said slowly. "These tracks are old, but those over yonder are fresh. You can see the muddy water in some of those hoof-prints, and they are pointing toward town. We better be getting back there pronto!"

Sheriff Ball helped Bowen pack up his simple equipment. He noticed that the lines of pain were etched deeper around Jim Bowen's mouth. He knew that his special deputy only wore the heavy brace when he had to leave his cobbler's shop, and he guessed at the pain it must have cost to wear it.

BETTY JUNE watched as Jim Bowen dismounted in front of the little barn. She saw the ropy muscles in his back and shouders swell as he caught a beam and swung from the saddle. She also noticed the pain in his rugged face, but he rejected her offer of help. He stripped his riding gear and stabled his Morgan alone.

"Let me help you, Jim," the girl pleaded, but Bowen smiled and carried his saddle-bags into the shop. Then he sat down on a heavy chair, tugged the straps loose from his brace, and kicked it aside. Beads of perspiration stood out on his brow as his crippled leg flopped sideways.

"That's better," he sighed. "Thanks for minding the shop, Betty June."

"There are six pairs of boots for you to mend," the girl told him.

Jim Bowen nodded and glanced at the boots on the counter. Then he leaned forward with his nostrils flaring. He stared at a pair of big boots which were covered with red loam.

"Who brought those boots in?" he asked Betty June.

"He was a fat man," the girl answered. "About thirty-five, and he was smoking a cigar."

"Hand me those circulars," Bowen said, and he took the posters and thumbed through them. He brought out one and showed it to Betty June.

"Is this the man who brought the boots?" he asked.

"That's him!" the girl whispered hoarsely. "Jim! He's wanted for robbery and rustling. It says his name is Craig Blair!"

"You better run along home, honey," Bowen said with a smile. "And ask Sam Ball to step down here for a moment."

"We were engaged to get married, Jim," the girl said wistfully. "Then you got hurt, and you released me. Jim, I don't want to be released!"

"You know what they call me behind my back," Bowen said bitterly. "Tangle Foot Bowen!"

"But I love you, Jim," the girl whispered. "I could save you so many steps if . . ."

"I can't stand pity!" Jim Bowen said coldly. "You'll tell the sheriff?"

Betty June Hollister rode to the sheriff's office and tied up at the rack in front of the jail. Sam Ball noticed the concern reflected in her dark eyes as she entered his office and came directly to him.

"Do you know Craig Blair, Sam?" Betty June asked bluntly.

"He's the front man for the Ryder gang, and fast with his six-shooter," the surprised sheriff answered without hesitation. "What makes you ask such a question, Betty June?"

"Blair brought a pair of boots in while you and Jim were away. Jim says the boots belong to Lefty Slim Connors!"

"So Jim was right," the sheriff growled softly. "He read a sign that was four days old, made some plaster moulds, and told me just how tall each man was, and how much he weighed. Then he told me their names!"

"I'm not a detective, but even I can read this sign," the girl said with a shudder. "They've come back here to keep the promise they made three years ago!"

"Not altogether," Sam Ball objected. "Their business is robbery, and they took ten thousand in cash from the Wells, Fargo stage!"

"If Jim would only marry me," Betty June said miserably. "I could help him so much! But because of that crippled leg, he says he won't tie me down!"

"He's tied you down even more," Sam Ball said, and his deep voice sounded a trifle bitter. "I've asked you to marry me a dozen times, but you won't ever love anyone but Jim Bowen!"

"Yes," the girl agreed softly. "I do love Jim."

Sam Ball shrugged his shoulders and stared thoughtfully into the gathering dusk of twilight. Then he patted Betty June's hand and told the girl that he would put a deputy to guard Jim Bowen's little shop.

"Out of sight, of course," he added. "Anyway they won't be back after those boots until sometime tomorrow!"

Betty June thanked the sheriff and left the office. She mounted her horse and started for home. On an impulse she neck-reined and rode through the alley behind Jim Bowen's little shop. She didn't know why, but something prompted her to make sure that Bowen was safe.

A sleek gray racer was tied to a tree near the back of the shop. Betty June caught a quick breath. It was the same horse Craig Blair had tied up that afternoon in front of the shop. Betty June slid from her saddle and crept slowly to the back door.

JIM BOWEN was preparing a simple meal in the little kitchen behind his shop. He heard a horse stop in the alley, then the creak of saddle leather when a heavy man swung to the ground. Bowen was wearing a canvas apron, and his left hand darted under the garment and drew his spare six-shooter. This he laid on a little shelf and covered it with a towel. Then he went on with his culinary preparations.

The door opened on well-oiled hinges, but Bowen gave no sign that he had heard. He turned a steak in the iron skillet, pushed the coffee pot to the back of the stove, and spoke quietly.

"Something I can do for you, Blair?" he asked.

He heard a wheezing gasp as he raised

his head. Craig Blair was staring at him from behind a cocked .45 six-shooter. The fat man had forgotten the unlighted cigar which dropped from the corner of his mouth.

"How'd you know my name?" he growled thickly. "And keep those hands in sight!"

"Bad news travels fast," Bowen answered slowly. "Lefty and Tiny left signs all over the place out by the creek, but the third man was too lazy to dismount. Then *you* brought their boots in this afternoon for repairs. What do you want?"

"You!" Blair answered bluntly. "The boys saw you and the sheriff riding, and you know too much, *Tangle Foot!*"

Angry color leaped to Jim Bowen's face as the outlaw sneered his nickname. He had removed the heavy brace from his left leg; he only wore the leg-iron when away from the shop.

"Yeah; Tangle Foot," he repeated bitterly. "Thanks to Jud Ryder!"

"Get out that door ahead of me and saddle your horse!" Blair ordered harshly. "The boys mean to keep that promise they made three years ago, and then we're long gone!"

"I'll put on my brace," Bowen said heavily.

"Leave that foot flop around!" Blair said savagely. "Out the back door!"

Jim Bowen moved a step and almost fell down. His left foot tripped him slightly, and he caught the shelf for support. Then he righted himself, put his hands behind him for support, and took a deep breath.

"I've waited three years too," he said slowly. "I'll ride out there with you, after I put on the brace!"

"You'll ride without it, Tangle Foot!" Blair contradicted. "The boys will laugh their heads off when they see you tangle up like a lobo with one foot in a trap!"

Jim Bowen closed his eyes, and his rugged face contorted with anger and pain. He swayed slightly to the left, caught his balance, and his right hand jerked into sight holding his .41 Bisley Colt. The gun roared thunderously and re-echoed back from the low ceiling.

Craig Blair screamed as the heavy six-shooter was torn from his right hand. Then he was down on his knees, holding his shattered hand against his chest.

Jim Bowen leaned back against the shelf with the smoking Bisley Colt in his strong right hand. The little bell rang on the front door, and Sheriff Sam Ball came barging through the shop with a gun in each hand.

"There's your prisoner, Sam," Jim Bowen said tonelessly. "I heard Betty June's horse stop back in the alley; knew you'd be here soon. He's wanted in Oklahoma for murder!"

"You should have killed the murdering son, Jim," the sheriff growled. "But he won't ever trigger another gun with that hand!"

The sheriff jerked the wounded man to his feet and took him out through the front door. Jim Bowen waited; he smiled when Betty June rushed through the back and came to him.

"I need you, Jim," the girl whispered. "More than you need me!"

She hid her face in his big shoulder, and Jim Bowen's arms went around her. All the fighting savagery had left his face, and for a moment he was almost handsome.

"I'm saving my money, Betty June," he told her gently. "Some day I'm going to Dallas for an operation. You'll wait until then?"

"I'll wait," the girl whispered. "I couldn't ever love any one else!"

BOWEN did not make a light. He had slept fitfully, and now it lacked an hour until daylight. His hands moved slowly to tighten the heavy brace on his left leg, and he groaned a time or two from the pain caused by the necessary pressure. Then he filled a cup with strong coffee from the pot on the back of the stove, drank slowly while the circulation returned to his injured leg, and pulled himself to his feet.

He had stabled Craig Blair's horse after the sheriff had taken the prisoner to jail. First, Bowen had examined the hooves of the gray racer, and some soil smudges he had found on Blair's heavy brush coat which the outlaw had tied behind his cantle.

In the murky gloom of the early morning, Jim Bowen looked like two men when he left his kitchen and made his way to the little barn. His left arm was around a muffled figure which might have passed for Craig Blair from a distance.

Bowen spoke softly as he entered the barn. He saddled the two horses in the darkness, sure of every move. He had made his plans during the sleepless

night for which he too, had waited three long years.

He had fashioned a dummy from some old clothes, and now he soothed the gray racer as he raised the dummy and placed it on Craig Blair's saddle. He caught a short rope tied to one leg of the dummy, fastened both legs under the belly of the horse, and topped the figure off with Blair's black Stetson which he tied with the throat latch.

Satisfied with his preparations, Jim Bowen tied the bridle reins of the gray to his saddle, mounted his own Morgan, and rode quietly from the barn and up the alley. Then he struck away from town, and he rode like a man who knew where he was going, and what he would find when he got there. The soil on Blair's coat had told him what he wanted to know, and it matched the particles of sandy red loam on the hooves of the gray racer.

Daybreak was showing in the east when Jim Bowen crossed Prouder Creek and turned to the right. He had worked as a range cowboy for old John Hollister on the Rafter H, before signing on to ride as Sam Ball's deputy. He knew every foot of the range country, and there was only one place where that red sandy loam could be found, with a bit of blue clay here and there. That was from the clear spring in Canyon Diablo.

Good name for it too, Bowen mused. The Devil's canyon, where one man could post himself on a look-out mesa and pick off an army who would have to ride in one at a time. It had also been the hide-out of the old Ryder gang. Jim Bowen knew the place well. He'd never forget it. It was in Canyon Diablo that he had met Jud Ryder, and had suffered the wounds that had earned him his nick-name.

A spasm of bitterness crossed Jim Bowen's face as he repeated the descriptive name.

"Tangle Foot Bowen!"

Jim Bowen took down his catch rope and tied one end around the neck of his Morgan horse. He ran the other end through the chin-strap of the gray racer, fastened it to the saddle horn, and twitched his guns loose from saddle-crimp.

Now it would seem as though Craig Blair were driving him ahead through the narrow pass. The light was getting stronger.

THEY'D be waiting in Devil's Canyon; Lefty Slim Connors and Tiny Avery. The second outlaw was a small man, but poison always comes in small packages. Avery would be wearing a brace of .45 six-shooters, and he could call his shots with accuracy.

It wouldn't be a duel, Jim Bowen thought. He'd open up on them at the first opportunity. Judge Colt made all men equal, regardless of size, and the odds were two-to-one.

If they got him, it didn't matter much, Jim Bowen reasoned bitterly. He was big enough, and stout as a bull. But that crippled leg was something else again. It wasn't too bad in the saddle, or in his shop where he had rails and ropes to help him from bench to bench. His lips curled as he reminded himself that he was a cobbler, mending the boots of more active men.

There was Betty June Hollister. He'd loved her for years; she had always been part of his life, even when he had been a tophand on the Rafter H, and Betty June had been a long-legged girl with pig-tails. They were to have been married three years ago, but then he had met Jud Ryder in Canyon Diablo.

Betty June was the prettiest girl in San Angelo. She had had a dozen proposals, and had refused them all. She was much too good for a cripple, Jim Bowen told himself savagely. But Betty June had remained faithful, and perhaps if the operation over at Dallas was successful . . . ?

Jim Bowen rode ahead, leading Craig Blair's horse. He kept to the brush as much as possible; the trail was not too wide at best and a watcher could not fail to spot his coming. He unbuttoned his brush coat to free his twin six-shooters.

He rode through the narrow pass with both hands on his saddle-horn. He followed the twisting trail, barely wide enough to clear his stirrups. There was a wide place around the next bend; a little grassy clearing whose memory was seared into his brain. He'd never forget that clearing; it was there that Jud Ryder had jumped him with a fast gun.

Jim Bowen knew he would never have been allowed to ride through the pass had it not been for his deception. In the murky light, Lefty Connors and Tiny Avery would think he was Craig Blair's prisoner. Jim Bowen knew

criminals, knew how their minds worked to grab every advantage.

They wouldn't give him a chance if they suspected the truth. He had made his own chance, now he wanted just one opportunity. He had waited three long years; three years filled with pain and bitterness. He too had made a promise.

This was it!

Jim Bowen rounded the bend and slowed his horse. A tall man was standing just off the trail, a lanky hombre who wore his six-shooter on the left side of his belt. He had both thumbs hooked carelessly in that shell-studded belt, and a sneering smile of expectancy on his hawk-like features.

Off to one side and slightly behind Lefty Connors, a second man was waiting. Even on his high spiked heels, Tiny Avery couldn't have been more than five-feet-five. He wore a brace of heavy .45 Peacemaker Colts thonged low on his spindly legs. His long nose was just wide enough to separate his little, piercing black eyes.

"Took you long enough, Craig!" Lefty Connors said harshly. "But I see you've brought back our bird. Light down out of that henskin, Tangle Foot!"

Jim Bowen tightened his lips and swung his right leg behind his cantle. He stepped down, stumbled when his weight rested on his left leg, and straightened up slowly.

"Howdy, Lefty," he greeted the tall outlaw. "Your boots won't be ready until tomorrow. Howdy, Tiny Avery!"

"Hey! Wait a minute!" Connors almost shouted. "How did you know me and Tiny?"

"You left signs all over the place," Bowen answered in his slow quiet drawl. "You're a cousin to the late Jud Ryder!"

"Looks like you know all the answers," Connors sneered. "It was the late Jud Ryder who made you what you are today. Tangle Foot, I mean!"

"He made me more than that," Bowen answered quietly. "He gave me the time to study. I don't depend on my arms and legs alone any more!"

"Get it over with!" Tiny Avery interrupted. "I'll make you a little bet, Lefty. I'll bet I can snuff out his light before you clear leather!"

"Hold it!" Jim Bowen said sharply. "For how much?"

"How much you got on you, not that it matters?" Slim Connors asked. "You're staying right here where you killed Jud Ryder three years ago!"

"Mebbe not," Bowen answered shortly. "I'll bet three thousand dollars!"

"Come easy, go easy," Tiny Avery interrupted again. "Take him up, Slim. Where did you get three thousand dollars?" he asked Bowen curiously.

"I took it off Craig Blair!"

LEFTY CONNORS sucked in a startled breath and went into a crouch. Tiny Avery raised both hands to shadow the twin grips of his killer guns. They both saw the brace of Bisley .41 Colts when Jim Bowen elbowed his brush coat aside.

"Who's that behind you?" Tiny Avery whispered hoarsely, and he spat a stream of amber from his thin lips without turning his head.

"Nobody," Bowen answered softly. "I came alone!"

"Gwan!" Connors jeered. "We saw Blair spiking you on the muzzle of his hawg-leg. If it hadn't been for that, we'd have blowed you out from under your hat the minute you rode into the pass!"

"I came alone," Bowen repeated. "I'm calling that bet!"

His hands rapped down for the balanced .41 Colts as he gave the swift warning.

Lefty Connors drove his left hand down to his holstered gun with the speed

---

Deputy Jim Bowen proves once more he has the muscle-power and gun-savvy to settle the hash of bushwhacking owlhoot hombres!

HELL ON HORSEBACK

Another Tangle Foot Story by CHUCK MARTIN—Next Issue!

of desperation. But Tiny Avery was an old hand, and he always coppered his bets. He was already in motion, striking for his notched guns like the deadly side-winder which gives no warning.

Jim Bowen cleared leather and triggered a shot at Avery with his right-hand weapon. Then the spare spoke thunderously, but Bowen's left leg gave way just as he pressed trigger. He tried to take a side-step to preserve his balance, but the useless foot flopped in front of him and almost tripped him.

Bowen turned his body and chopped another shot at Tiny Avery who was down, and bringing up his left-hand gun. Both weapons roared in unison, and the hat leaped from Jim Bowen's head. Avery gasped and flopped over on his back, and Jim Bowen stumbled and sat down hard to keep from losing his guns.

He whipped both weapons to cover Lefty Connors, but held his fire. Connors had lost his weapon, and he was down on his haunches staring at his shattered left hand. Then his right hand slipped behind him, and closed around the handle of his Bowie knife.

There was no mercy in the hard fighting face of Jim Bowen as he lined his sights and squeezed off a double shot. Lefty Connors screamed. His right hand had come out with the razor-honed knife, but it had flipped from this hand as his arm jerked back under the battering impact of two .41 slugs.

"Don't shoot, Sheriff!" Connors shouted frantically. "I can't move a finger!"

Jim Bowen turned slowly and holstered his smoking guns. He pushed up to his feet, stumbled awkwardly, and went down again with his left leg crumbling under him. Betty June burst out of the trail ahead of Sheriff Sam Ball and went to her knees beside Bowen.

"Are you hurt bad, Jim?" she asked tearfully.

Jim Bowen tightened his lips and straightened out his left leg.

"Not any worse, honey," he said slowly. "But just as much!"

"Then they did get you!" Sam Ball said roughly. "Why didn't you kill Connors like you did Avery?"

"Because they didn't get me," Jim Bowen corrected. "They bet each other their shares of the stagecoach loot that each of them could kill me before the other one got a shot away. I shot first both times!"

"But we saw you go down, Jim," the sheriff argued doubtfully. "You went down like a shot steer!"

"Yeah, I went down," Jim Bowen admitted bitterly. "But I kept a promise I made myself three years ago. Those two tried to keep the same promise, but I had an advantage over them but they didn't know it!"

His voice was tinged with irony as he spoke, and Jim Bowen sighed heavily. He reached down and unfastened the buckles that held the heavy iron brace. His leg always felt better after being released from the iron prison.

"I'll see that you get the rewards, Jim," Sam Ball promised gently. "To help you with that operation. But I don't savvy what you mean, Jim. What advantage did you have that those two owl-hooters couldn't match?"

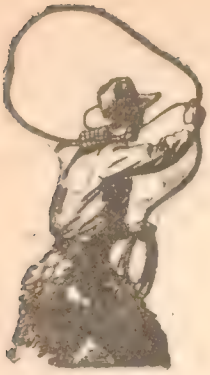
"Avery would have got me center with his second shot," Jim Bowen said quietly. "But my leg gave way and throwed me sideways and down. The advantage I had was this . . . Tangle Foot!"

196 PAGES OF BRAND NEW ACTION STORIES!

Featured in our new companion Western magazine—the biggest quarter's worth on your newsstand! The first issue headlines REBELS RIDE PROUDLY, a quick-trigger novel of the battle for open range, by Leslie Ernenwein—LAW-STAR FOR AN OUTLAW, a long novelet by W. C. Tuttle—and many other top-flight action yarns by the world's most popular writers of Western fiction!

GIANT WESTERN

NOW ON SALE—ONLY 25c AT ALL STANDS!



The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it!

By CHUCK STANLEY

THE enthusiasm of the young tenderfoot regarding the wagons used on a ranch was pleasing to the old-timer, and he assembled quite an interesting group of facts for the little get-together the pair had the next time work slackened up on the ranch.

"Folks did a heap of traveling by wagon long before they reached the Western spots they wanted to call home," the "mavericker" explained. "Like you know, some of them in Ohio and Indiana and places farther East, collected all their belongings in them big wagons and headed west with them. There were four or five wagons that went down in history for overland travel. Do you know anything about them?"

The Conestoga Wagon

"Sure thing," replied the "greener." "There was the Conestoga wagon, brought folks from as far East as New York state."

"That's pretty close," laughed the old-timer, "the Conestoga wagon was made at Conestoga, Pennsylvania. The folks who designed it figured that if it had wide wheels it would be a good wagon for traveling over soft ground and prairie grass. They had something right there. Another wagon that was used quite frequently and named after its home town was the Pittsburgh wagon. Folks weren't high-toned then, so they dropped the final 'h,' and called it Pittsburg."

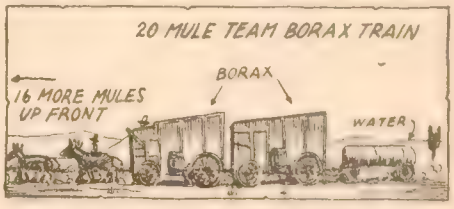
"Which one of those wagons were known as 'prairie schooners'?" inquired the tenderfoot.

"Most generally it was the Conestoga," replied the "oldster," "but it could have been any one of them. The name is supposed to have come from one of them Down East New England hombres who figured that the ballooning canvas on a Conestoga looked like a full-rigged sailing ship or a schooner with all sails set."

The old man stoked up his pipe, puffed on it, and then settled back against the heavy chair in which he was seated, and his sparkling eyes showed that the memories of the old days were stirring pleasant thoughts. He explained how some of the famous wagons took their names from their makers. These included the Bain and the Studebaker.

Twenty Mule Teams

"Lots of folks talked about a wagon according to the teams that pulled it," the "mavericker" went on. "A single pair of horses was hardly enough to pull the heavily loaded wagons, so there were times when a 'prairie schooner' might have as many as six, eight or even ten horses on it. Then there were the 'twenty mule teams' of the borax folks out in Death Valley. Horse-



power in them days could be either real spanking bays, or long-eared Missouri jackasses, or just plain dumb oxen."

The tenderfoot was licking his pencil carefully as he jotted down his notes. His wagon lore included the fact that horses

The Old-Timer Discusses Prairie Schooners and Place Names!

went by "teams," mules were hitched in pairs, and oxen were employed in "spans."

"How did they make out for brakes in those days?" inquired the "pilgrim."

"Well, that was one of those things that sort of developed by itself," the old-timer declared. "When the wagon builders first started constructing their wagons, they put on heavy wooden blocks that acted as friction brakes by locking against the wheels when you kicked down a pedal on the floorboards.

"Some of them mountains out West were plumb steep, though, and a wagon could keep right on sliding even with the brakes

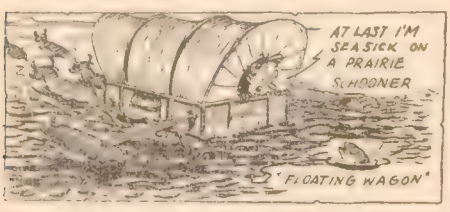
locked. Brigham Young was the fellow that figured out a solution for that. He is credited with the 'Mormon brake.'"

"What was a Mormon brake?" the "Arbuckle" inquired.

"Well," laughed the pipe-smoking leatherback, "it was a tree tied on behind a wagon to slow it up when it was going downhill. The Mormons first made use of it when they were crossing the San Bernardino Mountains, back in the 1850s. It sure worked."

Floating Wagons

"Floating wagons" were another type that the young newcomer to the West had heard the men talking about, and the old-timer explained how it was necessary to caulk the wagon boxes, place log outriggers on each



side, to help get the trail wagons across wide or deep water.

"Stage coaches were another interesting type of vehicle in the West," went on the range mentor. "Most folks, reading about the gold trimmed wagons they had in Europe and the Eastern part of the United States, sort of got the idea that the stage coaches romping around the West were about the same. The opposite was usually the case. Some of them wagons we talked about in our last chat, and some of the big heavy trail wagons were frequently rigged up as stage coaches. Some of them were plain, flat-bed wagons with two seats facing each other, and an iron step on each side so a fellow could step down between the wheels."

Stage Coaches Improve

As time went on, the old-timer pointed out, some of the large companies took an interest in the stage coach travel, and roads were more numerous than the trails the pioneers found, and stage-coaches improved in comfort and appearance. Even at their best, however, they were pretty rugged vehicles.

"One thing about them coaches," laughed the "waddy," "the men who took the job of driving them were real pumpkins, and the women too. Folks like Calamity Jane, for instance. A good driver was known as a 'crack tooler,' and he could really get something out of his horses. You fellows from the East probably think about neckties when an hombre talks about 'four-in-hands,' but a stage-coach driver who 'tooled' two teams was driving 'four-in-hand'."

"What was a 'drag driver'?" inquired the tenderfoot with some curiosity.

"Just like you might be able to figure out; he was a fellow who wasn't sure of his horses or his trail, and figured to ride most of the time with his foot on the brake. This dragged his wheels a lot, and didn't make for a very smooth ride."

Place Names

There was silence for a while and the youngster completed his notes on the various types of wagons. Then as though to prod the oldster into a resumption of the discussion on Western lingo, the "greener" said:

"I've always been curious about how places and things in the Old West came to have the names they now have. I know a good many of them are named after people, and others after curious things that have taken place there, but it might be interesting to have a list of these in compact form."

"That's a plumb entertaining idea," laughed the "mossy-horn." Lots of times we used to sit around the campfire and try to figure out how-come a place picked up

a certain name. There are all kinds of legends mixed up with some spots, but most names have been pretty well pinned down by now. First off, we might look at the names of the states themselves. Most of them had the same names as territories and they were an interesting mixture of the Spanish, the Indians and the Americans who followed them."

The old-timer picked out the states in their alphabetical order and pointed out that Arizona was an Aztec-Indian word meaning "silver-bearing." "Gents who came in to settle the territory didn't altogether agree with them Aztecs, even though they kept the name, because now Arizona is known as 'the Copper State.' But what's one mineral against another among friends."

Arkansas was a name that was a curious combination of the French and Indian languages. It took its name from the Arkansas River. The French contribution was the word "arc" meaning a bend in the river, and the Indian word "kansas" meaning "smoky water." Joined together this would give us the colorful name "bend in the smoky water."

"I didn't know that one," the tenderfoot broke in, "but I think I am up on my Spanish, so I'll take a crack at California."

The Golden Land

"Go to it," encouraged the "mavericker."

"It comes from 'caliente fornalla' which means 'hot furnace' in English. That was supposed to describe the climate there."

"That's right, son," agreed the oldster happily. "Later on folks—and a good many of them were cowboys—came to call it 'el dorado' or 'golden land' on account of the gold that was dug out of the mountains up around Sacramento."

The leather-faced and wrinkle-handed cowboy exchanged a number of other bits of lore with his avid student, and they took up the origins of the names of Colorado, Idaho, and Iowa in quick succession.

Colorado was derived from the Spanish word meaning 'colored,' and was given to the territory by the men of Coronado in their 1540 trek when they saw the mud in the Colorado River which gave it a reddish tinge. The Blackfeet Indians were responsible for the name of Idaho, which was their own designation for "unknown land."

The Hawkeye State

Iowa was another Indian name which the tribesmen used to describe their country as "beautiful land." The tenderfoot made his note to this effect, then asked:

"Why do folks call Iowa the Hawkeye state?"

"That goes back to the Indians, too," the old-timer explained. "It came from that old enemy of Abraham Lincoln, Chief Black Hawk, who played an active part in the early history of the territory."

The "greener" was familiar with Chief Black Hawk, leader of the Sac and Fox Indians. He then commented on the fact that Montana was a Latin name meaning "mountainous. The oldster agreed with him and rubbed his right hand against his work-worn clothing as he recalled a journey with cattle up into the Montana country for summer feeding.

"Nebraska and Nevada were two other states that took their names from physical aspects described by the Indians and the Spanish," he continued. "The Indians living near the Platte River in Nebraska described their country as the 'land in the water valley.' Their word for 'water valley' was Nebraska. The Spaniards gave Nevada its name, and the word referred to the snow-covered mountains. Nevada is the Spanish word for 'snow-covered.'"

"I've heard there are all sorts of names for the Dakota Territory which was finally divided up into North and South Dakota," pointed out the young pilgrim. "How do you account for that?"

Sign Language

"There are a number of explanations for that," the "mavericker" declared. "A good part of it was due to the fact that the Sioux Indians were one of the last large groups of Indians in North America to develop a written and spoken language. They used sign language for a considerable length of time. This was partly due to the fact that the Sioux were a federation of nations similar to the Iroquois, rather than a single tribe. There were the Yankton Sioux, the Mandan Sioux, the Ogallala Sioux and six or seven others. Each one of them referred

to their neighbors as 'allies,' and in the different dialects used by the various groups the word for 'allies' took on some curious twists as recorded by French, English, and American fur traders and trappers. Some of them got the name as 'Lakota,' others as 'Nakota,' and still others as 'Dakota.' All three of the words and numerous minor variations such as 'Dacotah' signified allies, and the Dakota territory was therefore the country of the Sioux allies."

"Boy, that was really something," chuckled the shorthorn. "But I've always been curious about the name of Oklahoma, because it was Indian Territory for so long, and still has a large Indian population."

"Indian words were descriptive, yet fairly simple," the old-timer pointed out, "therefore you won't be too surprised to discover that the name 'Oklahoma' simply means 'red people.' But Oregon has an interesting origin. We've seen how allies, mountains, rivers, mud and a number of other common items have accounted for the names of a number of our Western states. In the case of Oregon, it was a wild flower or herb which supplied the designation. Oregon comes from the Spanish word 'oregano' which is the wild marjoram. These flowers grew rather abundantly all up and down the coast that was visited by Juan de Fuca and other explorers."

Texas Means Friendship

Texas was a name that was particularly interesting to the collector of cowboy words, and he learned that this, too, was an Indian word for ally. It was adopted into the Spanish language as "Tejan" or "Tejano" because the Spaniards under Coronado and Cabeza de Vaca mistakenly believed that the Indians were describing their race when they spoke of being Tejas and indicated themselves by pointing in sign language. What they were saying was their equivalent of "We are your friends" or "We are your allies."

The Caddo Indians of Texas, from whose language the word was taken, used it quite frequently, because they were always looking for helpful allies and friends from all parts of the West in their fight against the Apache Indians of New Mexico and Arizona.

Utah was another state name which came from the Indian languages. It was the Ute Indian designation meaning "unknown land." The Utes themselves came by their names when pioneer plainsmen believed that they were describing the "unknown land" as their own territory.

As a matter of fact what we now know as the Ute Indian tribe is one of the Shoshone tribes.

"If pioneers were going to adopt the Indian name that was most descriptive for the Western prairie country," the old mavericker concluded, "they would have called the whole area leading up to the Rocky Mountains by the name 'Wyoming.' The name meant 'large plains,' and curiously enough was a variation of a word in the language of the Lenape Indians who were common along the East coast of the United States in Delaware, New Jersey and New York."

The "younker" digested this unusual bit of information, then made additional notes as the old-timer mentioned other names the cowboys had given to several territories to round out the Indian, Spanish and French names.

Nebraska, for instance, was known as "the black water state," because of the black loam which colored its waters. Nevada was variously called "the battle state" because it came into the Union during the Civil War, "the silver state," because of the great yield from the mines of the Comstock lode and elsewhere, and finally "the sage-brush state" because of the extensive tracts of this familiar frontier bush.

New Mexico was proudly called "the adobe state" because the extensive use of mud and straw dwellings of the old Mexican type immediately struck the eye of any cowboy who might be roaming through. Texas as "the Lone Star state," and Utah as "the Mormon state" were familiar enough to require no explanations.

With these remarks safely recorded, the greenhorn was more interested than ever in the origin of place names, and promised to be on hand for a discussion of cities, rivers and mountains at the earliest opportunity. The old-timer made a mental note to dig back deep into his active mind, and to talk with many of the other cowboys so that his lore of the West would be both accurate and colorful.

THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT
Appears in Every Issue of EXCITING WESTERN

Alcott stared out of the window and saw Kemble, who was wild-eyed

POWERFUL HOMBRE

By TEX MUMFORD

Though he's reputed to have more brawn than brains, big Lance Alcott does some fast thinking when he's on a spot!

LANCE ALCOTT had been working in the cow country ever since he was just a kid and he had plenty of range savvy. Trouble was that Alcott was a hombre who just didn't know his own strength. He was big and dark haired and mighty husky. When he got into fights, he hit the other man just once, and that was all there was to it.

"Had Lance Alcott workin' for me in my outfit, but I had to let him go," old Tom Dunster, of the Circle D said. "First thing that happened was Alcott and my foreman, Buck Canby, got scuffling in the bunkhouse one night in fun, and Alcott broke Canby's arm."

"That could have been an accident," said one of the men who were with

Dunster in the Gold Eagle Saloon. "Lots of jaspers get hurt foolin' around that way."

"Shore it was an accident, because Alcott doesn't really know how strong he is," said Dunster. "He grabbed Canby's left arm and snapped it like yuh would a match. But that was the first thing that happened."

"What next?" demanded the other men at the bar in chorus.

"Alcott gets the idea he would like to try bulldoggin' a steer," said the owner of the Circle O. "So he picks one of my best critters. He leaps out of the saddle, grabs the steer by the horns and twists." Dunster scowled and took another drink. "He broke that critter's neck. After that I figgered Alcott wasn't safe to have around so I fired him."

"From what I've heard just about every ranch in this part of the country feels the same way about Alcott," said another man. "Too bad—Lance is a nice feller. What's he doin' now, Dunster?"

"Seen him around town when I rode in this evenin'," Dunster said. "There's no hard feelings between us, and Lance told me he was lookin' for a job. Trouble is there ain't no jobs lookin' for him."

From down the street in the direction of the general store there came a loud crash. Ed Foster, owner of the store, had been drinking with Dunster and the others. He jumped when he heard the sound.

"I knew it!" he wailed, looking like an excited bald-headed baby. "I knew it! Had me a bunch of packing cases stacked up in front of the store, filled with glass and dishes and stuff like that. Lance Alcott was standin' right near them cases. He must have knocked them over."

THE men hurried out of the saloon to see what had happened. They found that Foster was right. The packing cases had fallen to the ground and two of them and their contents had been thoroughly smashed. Lance Alcott was standing nearby, looking sad.

"You did it!" shouted Foster as he reached the big young waddy. "You knocked over them cases, Lance, and yuh owe me three hundred dollars for damages."

"It was an accident, Ed," said Alcott mildly. "The top box looked like it might be a mite heavy so I tried to lift it. Then it slipped out of my hands and knocked over the whole shebang."

"All the same, since you broke all that stuff, yuh're goin' to pay for it," snapped the store keeper. "Three hundred dollars. Hand it over"

"Little hasty, aren't yuh, Foster," said Tom Dunster. "You can't be shore how much damage has been done until yuh check over what's broke." The old cattleman scowled. "And I'll bet everything in the cases and barrels together ain't worth more than three hundred dollars."

As he listened Lance Alcott found he was grateful for the way his former boss was coming to his defense. Folks knew that Ed Foster was a money pincher. It was said that he held a silver dollar so tight that the eagle screamed and the Liberty head on the other side would try to bite him.

The store owner wasn't too well liked in Bear Paw. He just didn't have the disposition for it.

"You keep out of this, Dunster," Foster said. "I'm plumb certain that Alcott done three hundred dollars' worth of damage and I want my money."

"I don't know how yuh're goin' to get it, unless I rob the bank or somethin'," said Alcott. "I only got nine dollars."

He glanced at a stranger who stood listening at the edge of the small crowd. Alcott saw that the big hard-faced man dressed in range clothes was about the same size he was, and that they both had dark hair. The stranger grinned wolfishly at Alcott, as though amused about something, then turned away, and headed up the dimly lighted street.

The men from the saloon were losing interest in the argument in front of the general store and gradually most of them drifted off about their business. Finally only Foster, Dunster, Alcott and a lean waddy named Slim Barlow, who worked for the Circle D, remained. Barlow had been Alcott's best friend in the outfit.

"I'm goin' to check over my broken stock," Foster announced. "And you are goin' to have to find the money within the next twenty-four hours or I'm turnin' you over to the law. And I'm shore it will amount to at least three hundred dollars!"

"The smell of skunk is too strong around here for me," said Dunster disgustedly as he turned away. "I've had enough."

The owner of the Circle D headed for the saloon without looking back. Slim Barlow grinned and slapped Alcott on the back.

"Don't let it throw yuh, Lance," Barlow said. "It's always darkest before dawn, like the feller says. Reckon I better be goin'. Came to town with the boss and he expects me to ride back with him. Be seein' yuh."

Barlow hurried away toward the Gold Eagle. Alcott just looked at the bald-headed storekeeper and then started down the street in the opposite direction from the saloon. He walked slowly, his head down and his boots dragging along the dusty plank walk. Right then Lance Alcott was feeling mighty low.

He passed the Bear Claw Bank and saw a light gleaming through a window. Evidently the bank president and the teller were working late tonight as they often did. Alcott figgered it didn't much matter as far as he was concerned. He didn't have any money in the bank anyway.

"And I ain't likely to have any there in the near future," Alcott muttered as he walked on. "Way I feel, I'm sorry for all the elephants in the world 'cause they are so much like me."

There were only a few buildings at the lower end of the town and they were dark and deserted. Alcott started to pass the entrance to an alleyway. He heard no sound or saw no one but something crashed down on his head with such force that his hat did not even soften the blow. Everything went black and he dropped to the ground unconscious.

WHEN he regained his senses he found that he was bound hand and foot, and he was gagged. He appeared to be lying in the back of a spring wagon, and there was a team hitched to the vehicle, for the horses moved restlessly and stamped, though they were tied to a tree.

Alcott managed to sit up. In this position he could see around him. It still was night and he finally realized the wagon was behind some of the buildings at the lower end of the town.

Just why he had been knocked out, taken prisoner and placed in the wagon puzzled him. He couldn't see any reason for the whole thing. He tried to free himself, but whoever had fastened his wrists behind him had used plenty of heavy rope, and despite his great strength Alcott found he could not break his bonds.

He finally gave up and just sat there waiting. Off to his right he could see the rear of the Bear Claw Bank, the square adobe building looming larger than the other structures around it. There were only three other buildings as large in the town. The hotel, the saloon and the two-story adobe building that housed the sheriff's office and local jail.

From the bank there suddenly came a shout and then two shots fired close together. Lance Alcott grew tense as he heard the gunfire. It sounded as if somebody were robbing the bank!

A few moments later a figure darted out of the shadows behind a nearby building and dashed toward the wagon carrying what appeared to be a heavily loaded gunnysack in its hand.

The moon came out from behind a cloud, and in the pale light Alcott saw the face of the stranger he had seen in front of the general store—the big man who had grinned at him and turned away.

"So you come out of it," the stranger said as he reached the wagon, with the sack in his hand and saw Alcott sitting there. "Just stay right where you are and don't try any tricks. I ain't got time to bother with you now. That's not the way Drag Kemble works."

"Gub—blub-blub," said Alcott, trying to talk through the gag in his mouth. "Gub—gub."

Learning the big man's name had startled him. Drag Kemble was a notorious outlaw who always worked alone and who was wanted in at least six states for everything from murder to horse stealing. There was a reward of five thousand dollars for his capture dead or alive.

Alcott had heard of Kemble being in this part of Texas up to now, but the man was likely to appear anywhere.

Kemble threw the sack in the back of the wagon and took off his black Stetson that looked a lot like the hat that Alcott had worn. Then he reached under the seat of the wagon and drew out a battered old straw hat and a white object.

Putting on the straw hat, the big outlaw turned his back to his prisoner as he adjusted something on his face. When Kemble again turned around Alcott found himself staring at what appeared

to be the white bearded face of an old farmer.

"Lie down flat," commanded Kemble. "Hurry up! Do like I say or I'll crack you over the head and knock you out again."

Alcott didn't figure he would like that. Another blow like the last one might kill him. He stretched out flat on the floor of the wagon bed. Kemble tossed a blanket over him so that Alcott was completely hidden.

A few moments later Alcott discovered the wagon was moving. It dawned on him that Drag Kemble was smart. The aroused men of the town would be expecting the bank robber to escape on horseback. A slow moving spring wagon would be the last thing they would think of the outlaw using.

The wagon rolled on beyond the lower end of the town, though Alcott did not know that. He only knew he was being taken somewhere along with the money stolen from the bank.

Finally he heard the hoofbeats of many horses coming steadily closer. The wagon kept on moving slowly.

"Feller just robbed the bank," called the heavy voice of Sheriff Mead. "We think he rode out of town in this direction. Yuh see anythin' of him, old-timer?"

"Feller passed me back along the road," answered Kemble in a high cracked voice. "He was riding like blue blazes. So the bank was robbed! They lose much money?" He halted the buckboard. "Leaping horn toads, I got money in that there bank! I better get on into town and see about this."

"Thanks!" called the sheriff as he and the posse rode on south of the town. "We'll get that blasted robber!"

KEMBLE waited quietly. Alcott had managed to wiggle out from under the blanket so he could see. The outlaw waited until the posse had disappeared around a bend in the road to the southward, and then he chuckled.

"I shore told the truth when I said I got money in that there bank," he said. "I got a lot of it. Well, it's time to be gettin' on."

He wheeled the team, drove back along the road a short distance and then headed across a stretch of flat country to the westward as he circled the town. Kemble brought the wagon back on the road north of Bear Claw.

Alcott had found that while his wrists were tied his fingers were free and he could use his hands to some extent. The sack containing the bank money was right beside him, and since he had also discovered there was a small hole in one of the boards beneath him, for the next hour or so Lance Alcott was a very busy prisoner.

It was getting close to dawn when the wagon halted in front of an old deserted line camp cabin back in the hills. Alcott stared up at the red glow in the sky and from behind the gag he wore came what sounded like a chuckle.

"Here we are," said Kemble, as he climbed down off the driver's seat and came around to the side of the wagon. "Home at last."

The big outlaw appeared to be in a very jolly mood. The way Alcott figured—Kemble wouldn't stay that way very long.

It grew steadily lighter as dawn broke. Kemble unfastened Alcott's gag and tossed it aside.

"Thanks," said Alcott. "Shore is a nice morning for ducks."

Kemble loked surprised. He pulled off the white beard and thrust it into his pocket, then replaced the straw hat with his own black Stetson.

"I thought they usually said it was a nice day for ducks when it was raining hard," Kemble answered thoughtfully. "Ain't that right?"

"It is," said Alcott calmly. "But things change. Have you got any proof that ducks don't like a nice sunshiny day?"

"No," said Kemble. "Come to think of it, I don't."

"Like I just said." Alcott nodded. "Things change. I can remember way back last night when you were a rich man, Kemble. What with all that money you stole from the bank. But you ain't rich now."

"What do you mean?" Kemble's voice grew hard. "Where's that sack with the bank money?"

He tossed aside the blanket and picked up the empty sack. There was murder in his eyes as he glared at his prisoner.

"What did yuh do with the money?" Kemble roared.

"Reckon I left a trail of it all the way from that spot on the road north of Bear Claw to here," said Alcott. "You see I

got it out of the sack a little at a time and dropped it through a hole in the wagon bed. I'm bettin' it left a trail that a smart sheriff and a posse could follow easy as all get out."

For a few moments Kemble stood there cursing. Once he reached for one of the two guns he wore as though about to draw and kill the man who had tricked him. Alcott breathed a sigh of relief as the big outlaw stopped cursing and drew his hand away from his gun.

"You're smart, Alcott," he said in a calmer tone. "A heap smarter than I figgered from what I seen and heard of you in town. Me, I like smart people."

"Then we both should be plumb happy," Alcott said dryly.

"Shore is nice to know that there ain't a soul in this part of the country that knows what I look like," said Kemble. "There's no picture of me on any of the reward posters and the description of Drag Kemble reads like that of most any big man."

"Which seems to be leadin' up to somethin'," said Alcott. "But what?"

"Last night I was smarter than the sheriff," Kemble said. "When I saw an old white bearded man driving a wagon right after the bank robbery I got suspicious, so I trailed that wagon on my hoss. That bank robber caught me though. He knocked me out and put me in the back of the wagon unconscious."

"There's something awfully familiar about this story," said Alcott. "Go on."

THE outlaw grinned at his prisoner in an ominous way.

"I regained consciousness quicker than the bank robber figgered," continued Kemble. "Found the wagon was movin' on through the night and the bag containin' the money was lyin' right beside me."

"So you thought fast—using my brains," said Alcott. "And left a trail of money along the road. Is that it?"

"That's it." Kemble looked at his prisoner in mock surprise. "How did yuh guess it? And then we got into a big fight. I won and captured you and tied you up. Shore was surprised to find that yore white beard was a fake."

"I'm right surprised myself," said Alcott, sitting up in the wagon. "But what became of the hoss you were ridin' when you were trailin' the wagon?"

"You mean the blaze faced sorrel?"

"Or the lop-eared roan," said Alcott. "Seein' as there ain't any hoss in the first place."

"That's where you're wrong," said Kemble. "Reckon I'll have to show you."

He walked away and disappeared behind the cabin. After about ten minutes he reappeared riding a saddled horse, and it was a blaze faced sorrel.

"You see," said Kemble as he halted his mount near the wagon. "I knew I was comin' here and figgered I might need a spare hoss so I left this sorrel. Now I'll be ridin' back along the money trail to meet the sheriff like an honest man should do."

The outlaw rode away leaving Lance Alcott still bound hand and foot and feeling uneasy. Kemble could tell a convincing story when he put his mind to it.

The time dragged slowly for the prisoner. He tried to free himself but failed again and again. The sun was hot and he was both hungry and thirsty. It was almost with a sense of relief that he saw a bunch of riders approaching around noon. Kemble was riding in the lead beside Sheriff Mead. Alcott admired the big outlaw's nerve.

"There he is, Sheriff," said Kemble as the riders drew closer. "Just like I told yuh. Still a prisoner in the wagon the way I left him."

"You've done some crazy things, Alcott," said the sheriff, who was a gray mustached old-timer. "But robbin' the bank last night and killin' them two men shore is the worst yet."

"I didn't rob the bank," said Alcott. "It was Kemble, there, who done it and took me prisoner."

"Told yuh he kept callin' me Kemble," said the big outlaw. "Guess he figgers that if he can make yuh think I'm that outlaw, yuh might believe his story sheriff."

"But I don't believe it," said Mead. "Funny thing about that money trail, though." The sheriff looked at Kemble.

Exciting True Picture-Stories of the World's Greatest Heroes in REAL LIFE COMICS—Approved by Parents and Teachers—Now on Sale, Only 10c

"You said yuh dropped money all the way from just outside of town to here but we ain't found any of it. If yuh hadn't met up with us on the road and told us what happened, we never would have come here."

"Yeah, that money being missin' is shore strange." Kemble glared at Alcott. "I'm still wonderin' about that."

"Then Slim Barlow got—" Alcott broke off and looked anxious.

"Who is Slim Barlow?" Kemble asked the sheriff.

"A cowhand who works for the Circle D," said the sheriff. "Let's be getting back to town. Might as well let Alcott stay right where he is in the wagon and take him back that way."

Three hours later Lance Alcott found himself a prisoner in a cell of the jail that was on the second floor of the adobe building. He had been given a chance to talk to the sheriff alone, and Adam Mead was a man who was willing to listen. The prisoner had been permitted one visitor and that was Slim Barlow.

At four o'clock on that hot sunny afternoon Alcott stood at the barred window of his cell staring out. He saw Slim Barlow step out of the sheriff's office below on the first floor of the building.

From somewhere close by Drag Kemble appeared. The big man's hat was missing and there was a wild look in his eyes.

"All right, Barlow," he snarled, suddenly drawing his gun and, covering the slender waddy. "You and Alcott have been smart. His tellin' me that he left a trail of the money that I stole from the bank when he really passed it to you was a good trick, but you'll tell me where that money is now or I put a bullet in yore heart."

"Don't shoot," said Barlow nervously as he raised his hands above his head. "I'll tell you! Give me a chance!"

Alcott was watching and listening tensely at the window. His big hands grasped the nearest window bar and unconsciously he tugged at it with all his strength. Slim Barlow didn't know where the bank money was and the moment Kemble found that out he would kill the cowboy.

"Tell me," snapped Kemble. "Hurry up!"

Alcott gave a great heave and the bar at the window was pulled loose.

"It—it is hidden—" Barlow began and then stopped. "I don't know where it is. Don't shoot!"

At the window Alcott flung the heavy iron bar. His aim was good. The bar hit Kemble on the forehead and knocked him to the ground. His right hand gun roared, the bullet going harmlessly into the air as he fell.

Barlow leaped forward and kicked the guns out of Kemble's hands and then uttered a laugh as he discovered the big man was unconscious. The sheriff and one of his deputies came running out from the office.

In a few minutes the unconscious outlaw had been placed in a cell and Alcott had been released.

"Thought Kemble would go after Barlow after I made it sound like Slim had the bank money," said Alcott. "But I didn't think he would try to kill Slim. Reckon yuh're convinced that Kemble is the man I said he was, Sheriff."

"No doubt of it," said Mead. "But where's the bank money, Lance?"

"Right where I left it, under the seat of the wagon," said Alcott. He frowned. "I still got to pay Ed Foster for that stuff I broke at the store."

"Since yuh get the reward for Kemble's capture I reckon you can afford it," said the sheriff. He glanced at the missing bar in the cell window. "I'm shore glad you ain't my prisoner any longer. Don't know what might happen to my jail if yuh stayed in it." The old lawman grinned. "Like folks say—yuh just don't know yore own strength."

ENTERTAINMENT ON EVERY PAGE OF

SEE

America's Most Popular Picture Magazine

NOW ON SALE — 15c AT ALL STANDS!

With a sudden twist of his hand, Worth flicked the knife across the fire

REMEMBER THE KNIFE

By LEO CHARLES

Knife-throwing was just a profitable stunt to Bert Benton—until two deadly avengers and a marshal came out of the past!

BEHIND him they were talking in low tones, but the words came clearly to his ears.

"Never knew of a man before who robs you with a knife—and makes you like it," said one man. "He's a queer one, Bert is. Mighty queer."

"That he is," a second man answered. "Feller like him could be mighty dangerous, too, if he warn't such a peaceful cuss."

Bert Benton, his weight on his crippled right leg, stood poised at the entrance of the livery stable. The fingers of his right hand, bent back across his shoulder, held a gleaming ten-inch steel blade.

He heard the comments of the waddies grouped in a semi-circle behind him, and for a fleeting moment his eyes glinted like sun on a gunsight. As always, when he threw, his lips were tight and—in affinity—curiously resembled an unhealed knife slash.

With a quick motion Bert threw his weight forward, his left leg taking the power of the thrust. Down the center of the stable, past five stalls, the knife was a glinting blur in the semi-gloom. It jarred into an inch-wide square on a wooden board and defaced the tiny figures 44. The first figure on the triangular board had been No. 1 in the upper left hand corner, the last and lone figure in the last line No. 1,000. A knife thrust through that pointed portion would shear the tail of the board—writing finish to as curious a shakedown as the West had ever known.

"That, mister," said Bert, turning, "will cost you exactly two-bits."

"Gosh!" the waddy said, flipping a coin into the air. "That throw was a good forty feet. Never knew anybody could throw like that. You can hardly see them squares from here."

Bert pocketed the coin. "That's forty-four in a row — number by number — men," he said. "Even money I can split number forty-five. Any takers?"

There was no pride, no boastfulness, in his voice, and the tenseness of his body and the wariness of his eyes were not too apparent. They darted in penetrating forays at each friendly face.

"I'll buy a dollar's worth," a rancher said. "It's a long ways to a thousand at two-bits a head. And I'm so shore of losin' I'm payin' in advance." He spun a silver dollar to Bert.

When Bert returned from making the third throw, he saw the stranger calmly sitting his horse and watching from the outer ring of the circle. His jaw muscles tightened, and there was a brief indecisiveness about Bert. Then he threw, and No. 48 was cut in half.

There was a murmer of approval. "I'm buyin' 'nother four-bits worth, bringing Cozey's pot to twelve-fifty," the rancher said. "That'll leave just nine hunnert and fifty squares to go before Cozey gets his two-hundred and fifty dollars."

"Sorry," Bert said, brushing aside the half-dollar piece. "Got business to attend to." He walked up to the stranger and said: "Want that horse stabled, mister?"

THE stranger's eyes locked with Bert's. They seemed to recede and harden and his smile was chill.

"That's quite a show you're putting on," he said. "Never saw a man who could do what you're doin', but I heard of one — once — about eight years ago. Only when he threw he didn't do it for entertainment."

Bert was silent. When the stranger dismounted, Bert hobbled into the stable, leading the horse. He could feel his heart hammering. Nervous perspiration ran down his face and dripped spasmodically from his grim chin.

He cursed himself for a conceited fool. He should have known that a stunt like this would spread like wildfire through the mountains. It was sensational, no doubt of it. But in less than a week — with less than fifty numbers gone — the first curious stranger had made his appearance. And each toss was an open invitation to swing at the end of a rope.

Outside, the stranger asked the waddy:

"Who's he? He's an odd sort of man to be working as a stable attendant."

"Oh, he's Bert Benton. Been around here about seven years. He don't talk much. From the way he handles horses I would say he was a top hand once. Said a horse rolled with him. He's a great hombre. Got a heart bigger'n all outdoors. And he's prouder than sin."

The stranger motioned at the numbered board. "Proud? I'd say offhand he was working a two-bit skin game."

"Nope. He won't take anything for nothing. That board is for his kid, Cozey. He's crippled, too. He was born with a bad hip, and one leg's shorter'n the other. A doc in Denver says he can break that hip and set it right for two hundred and fifty bucks."

"That's sort of a charity."

"No, it ain't. Sometimes Bert misses. Them squares from here ain't no bigger'n pinpoints. And to see anyone do what he can with a knife is worth more'n two-bits. It's hard work and seems to leave him weak and shaken every time he finishes the trick, like mebbe he was scairt. Only I know he ain't. He's a steady feller, and we all give him credit for havin' a lot of nerve."

"Nerve?" the stranger asked musingly. "Did he ever have enough nerve to try the trick with his left hand?"

"Nope, can't say he has. But that would be askin' too much of anybody. Bert especially. He would have to bring his whole weight down on his bum right leg when he threw."

"Hum-m."

Bert hobbled out of the stable and stood stock still to watch three men from the JY lope their horses through the mud of the street. For a fleeting second there was a wistfulness in his eyes, then he turned to the waddy.

"Okay for that shave now."

"Shave," the stranger said in surprise.

"There's a dance at the courthouse tonight," Bert said. "Barber shop's full. I sort of help out on days like this. Gettin' the boys all prettied up brings in a few extra bucks."

"If I didn't know you better, Bert, I'd say you had larceny in yore heart," the rancher called out.

Bert's eyes locked with the stranger's again.

"Mebbe," he said slowly, "I have." He led the way into a room adjoining the stable. Slats nailed to an up-ended barrel made a barber chair. Bert pulled a washed floursack around the waddy's neck and began lathering his face.

The stranger strolled inside and seated himself on the window sill. "Since the barber shop's full, I'll take my shave here, too, if it's okay with you."

Bert grunted. His hands were deft and quick and when he stroked the razor he held the leather strap like it was a latigo. When he turned the waddy's head to shave the far side of his face, he didn't bother to change position, simply shifting the razor to his left hand. The stranger's smile grew more chill.

Bert noticed his mistake too late. This is it, he thought. His eyes swept the stranger. The man was big, competent, dressed in the pepper suit with his pants legs stuffed into boots. His gun was rawhided to his thigh. When he removed his coat, Bert expelled a long breath. The badge was there—a United States marshal.

A boy of twelve came slowly through the door at the rear of the room. He was thin, his face haggard, the pain in his eyes apparent.

"Hi!" he shrilled. "Are yuh goin' to need a shine for that dance, mister?"

"Shore enough, Cozey, but I ain't gettin' it now," the waddy said. "Too muddy. But I'll get it just before the dance. Here's four-bits on account."

QUICKLY the boy shook his head. "The job — tip and all — is worth just two-bits. Ain't that right, Bert?"

Bert grinned, and softness replaced some of the bleakness in his eyes.

"That's right. When a man don't take something that ain't rightfully his, he don't have to apologize later."

The marshal grunted and looked his surprise at Bert. "That's an odd philosophy."

"That's the only one to teach a kid," Bert snapped. "Especially for a crippled kid who could make it too easy without earning it."

The marshal grunted again, and seated himself on the barrel when the waddy tramped outside.

"Shine, mister?" Cozey said.

"Sure, go ahead — the full two-bits' worth."

Bert drew the flour sack around the marshal's neck, then abruptly excused himself as a wagon drew up to the livery stable entrance.

Watching through the window, the marshal saw the old woman handling the team speak briefly with Bert, and hold up her hands in protest. Bert disappeared and returned carrying a sack of flour. He dumped it in the wagon bed, then stood in the mud, looking up and smiling. The woman was talking a blue streak.

The boy turned and began rubbing the marshal's boots. He was chuckling.

"That Bert!" he said. "He can lie like sin. He's been tellin' the widow for a year that he gets more flour than he can use as stable rent. He's sorry for her. He acts tough, but he ain't. He has to buy that flour."

The marshal rubbed his stubby chin. "Bert's pretty young to be yore pa, 'pears to me?"

"He ain't, but it's just like he was. My folks was tenderfeet from the East. A couple of years ago they got off the road in the mountains and drove the team and wagon over the shaft of an old silver mine. The timbers were rotten, I suppose. Anyway, the team and wagon and Ma and Pa went down in the cave-in. That left me all alone. So when Bert told me how lonesome he was— Well, I just came here to live with him."

"You like it here."

"Shore. Who wouldn't like to be where horses are?" Then brightly. "And Bert says that when I come back from the hospital, after he cuts up those thousand squares on the board, I'll be able to ride them. Ain't that somethin' nice, mister."

"That," said the marshal, "shore is

somepin' nice." He suddenly chuckled and ran his hand through his thin hair. "Yep. This is shore somepin' sonny." . . .

The razor slithered across the jowl of the marshal. Bert pushed back his head and started to shave the throat.

"Yep," the marshal was saying, "it was about eight years ago. There was two brothers named Franklin, a saddle bum named Dodds, and a wild kid named Worth. They made two mistakes. . . ."

The razor was steady in Bert's hand. Sudden pressure against the throat would do the trick. The keen steel would cut deeply — and fatally. He could say the man had suddenly reared upward in the chair. Cozey would be the only witness, and Bert could make it look good enough so that even Cozey could be fooled into believing his lie. He could stand an inquiry. His name actually was Bert Benton, and there was nothing in Kansas or here that could be held against that name. . . .

"They held up a rider carrying a big mine payroll above Blackhawk. But that wasn't a major mistake. Killing the rider was. But their biggest mistake was taking his saddle-bags instead of just the money. You see, those saddle-bags contained United States mail, too. That's why I'm so interested in the case. The Government never forgets."

"Gee!" Cozey said. "Did yuh ever capture 'em, shoot 'em or anythin' like that?"

Bert's hand shook and a small blot of blood appeared on the marshal's neck. A quick movement and—

"None. We found out that one of the brothers had been killed. A knife stuck in his throat. We know the other brother and Dodds are in these parts. They've graduated to banks. They usually rob when all the town is interested in something else, like in this dance here tonight. That's why I took a chance on ridin' over here."

"How about the wild kid, Hurth or Worth, or whatever his name was?"

"Don't rightly know. His saddleless horse was found still wearing a bridle. Maybe he's dead, too. Queer things happen in these bandit gangs, and some never get explained."

BERT grunted, and suddenly his hands were steady and deft again. He remembered to go around the chair to shave the far side of the marshal's face. Cozey finished the boots and went to the rear of the stable to get the marshal's fed horse. The marshal stood up and began tying his tie.

"I just happened to mention that story," he told Bert, "because the wild kid—Worth—had a hobby of throwing knives. He was almost as good as you are—only he was left handed. I hear the brother, Joe Franklin, and Dodds are lookin' for him. They say he killed the other brother, Pete Franklin, when he threw a knife hilt-deep in his throat."

"He must be a hard man," Bert said, staring out the window.

"He is hard—mighty hard—and dangerous."

Cozey brought up the horse, and Bert stroked its neck as in benediction. There was envy in his eyes as the marshal toed the stirrup and swung into the saddle.

"Yuh know," the marshal said carelessly, "a man like this Worth never would have been blamed fool enough to set up a trick knife board like that."

"No," Bert said, "I don't think a man like Worth would do that."

"But a man like Bert Benton would?"

"There's all kinds of men."

The marshal dismounted, as in afterthought. "Stable it again, son," he said. "I think I'll just look around until the dance."

"But yore boots will get all muddy," Cozey protested.

"I suppose so. But that'll make me need another shine for the dance."

Cozey grinned and led the horse to the rear of the stable.

"That's a fine boy you've got there." The keen eyes were studying Bert again. "I'll bet you would go the limit for him?"

"He's a fine boy." Bert abruptly turned his back and limped into the room.

He stood by the window, watching the marshal trudge through the mud. The marshal was right. He had to go the limit, all right, for the kid. There was no escape now. In fact he had known it one week before when he had seen Dodds walk his horse down the street. A few days later he had started the board. It was the only method he could think of to quickly raise the needed two hundred and fifty dollars.

Dodds had looked the same save for a few more gray hairs, mean-mouthed, hawk-nosed, insolent in the saddle. And where there was Dodds, there certainly

was a Franklin nearby—a Joe Franklin thirsting to avenge his brother after having failed in a particularly canny attempt to have the law do so.

Bert remembered it vividly. He had known from the time he left Kansas that he was due to raise a little dust. He could not fight the hot urge for excitement surging in his blood. Hence he had become Worth. He already had brought enough grief to his father.

It was all picayunish stuff—gambling, drinking and brawling. He had established a reputation of sorts when he had knocked a gun from a killer's hand with his knife in a saloon. It was in the same saloon that he had met the Franklin brothers and Dodds.

When the holdup of the payroll messenger had been proposed—small time stuff—Worth agreed readily to it. That would be raising a little dust while simultaneously making it financially possible to raise more dust. His part in the deal simply was to walk his limping horse along the trail approaching the rider. A tightly-tied piece of twine around the horse's hock would make the limp legitimate.

This he had done, and the rider had stopped as expected, the rider sitting negligently in the saddle, hands free from his guns.

The shot from the arroyo bushes was unexpected. The rider tumbled from the saddle. The Franklins, Joe and Pete, and Dodds had ridden up, taken the saddle bags, and ridden off. Dismayed, Worth had cut the twine on his horse's leg and followed, slowly at first, then at a full gallop as the circulation in the horse's leg became normal.

He lost the gang, but persistently followed trail. He realized that he had been played for a sucker. If the rider lived, he could identify only Worth—Worth, the wild and foolish kid who would get no part of the loot.

The rider had been alive but unconscious when the gang had galloped off. But he had died before Worth could cut loose the twine and massage the horse's leg until it was suited to riding. That knowledge was Worth's ace in the hole.

IT WAS near dawn, the light of the campfire a dull pink, when he had

[*Turn page*]

To People who want to write *but can't get started*

Do you have that constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

"There is more room for newcomers in the writing field today than ever before. Some of the greatest of writing men and women have passed from the scene in recent years. Who will take their places? Who will be the new Robert W. Chambers, Edgar Wallace, Rudyard Kipling? Fame, riches and the happiness of achievement await the new men and women of power."

HAD NEVER WRITTEN A LINE SELLS ARTICLE BEFORE COMPLETING COURSE

"Before completing the N. I. A. course, I sold a feature to Screenland Magazine for $50. That resulted in an immediate assignment to do another for the same magazine. After gaining confidence with successive feature stories, I am now working into the fiction field. Previous to enrolling in the N. I. A., I had never written a line for publication, nor seriously expected to do so."—Gene E. Levant, 116 West Ave., 28, Los Angeles, Calif.

Writing Aptitude Test — FREE!

THE Newspaper Institute of America offers a free Writing Aptitude Test. Its object is to discover new recruits for the army of men and women who add to their income by fiction and article writing. The Writing Aptitude Test is a simple but expert analysis of your latent ability, your powers of imagination, logic, etc. Not all applicants pass this test. Those who do are qualified to take the famous N. I. A. course based on the *practical* training given by big metropolitan dailies.

This is the New York Copy Desk Method which teaches you to write by writing. You develop your *individual* style instead of trying to copy that of others. You "cover" actual assignments such as metropolitan reporters get. Although you work at home, on your own time, you are constantly guided by experienced writers. It is really fascinating work. Each week you see new progress. In a matter of months you can acquire the coveted "professional" touch. Then you're ready for market with greatly improved chances of making sales.

VETERANS
THIS COURSE APPROVED FOR VETERANS' TRAINING

Mail the Coupon Now

But the first step is to take the Writing Aptitude Test. It requires but a few minutes and costs nothing. So mail the coupon now. Make the first move towards the most enjoyable and profitable occupation—writing for publication! Newspaper Institute of America, One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y. (Founded 1925)

Free

Newspaper Institute of America
One Park Ave., New York 16, N. Y.

Send me, without cost or obligation, your Writing Aptitude Test and further information about writing for profit.

Mr. }
Mrs. } .....
Miss }

Address.....

( ) Check here if you are eligible under the G.I. Bill of Rights. (All correspondence confidential. No salesman will call on you.) 94-A-668

Copyright 1947, Newspaper Institute of America.

located the owl-hoot camp.

One of the Franklins had awakened as Worth was cutting the horses free of their hobbles.

The motion for his gun was swift and deadly. Worth, with a sudden twist of his left hand, had flicked the knife across the fire and sent Pete Franklin over on his back, dead, with a sharp blade in his throat. It was done in utmost silence.

Then he had kicked awake Joe Franklin and Dodds, disarmed them, and taken the saddle-bags. The raid had been perfectly achieved. The men were disarmed and afoot—and Worth had planned returning the money bags somehow.

Fun was fun, but not when there was murder mixed in it.

He'd made one mistake. At the last moment he had decided to exchange his tired roan for a still hobbled croppy-eared and mean chestnut, the choice horse of the group.

He had forced Dodds to change his saddle to the chestnut. A surly Dodds previously had been shaving wood to build up the fire as Worth had announced his intention of returning the loot, saying he must do so because the wounded rider only could identify him and he had no intent of being a dupe on whom the gang could later lay the blame.

He should have been more cautious of Dodd's knife. He wasn't, simply because he knew Dodds could not throw a knife.

He had ridden off on the jittery chestnut. A few minutes later it had reared and shied when a rabbit crossed its path. When Worth tried to pull it up, it tossed the book at him. It leaped, four feet clear, its head down and really went to bucking. It bit, kicked, squealed, crow-hopped and king-fished. When it reared straight up again, Worth stayed against its neck.

Suddenly the cinches gave away. The straps snapped and Worth shot off the chestnut's rump, and the horse fell back on top of him . . .

He awoke to an agonizing pain. His right leg was broken, as was his nose. His teeth had been knocked out and his back seemed to be on fire. The saddle was there and Worth saw where a knife had loosed the cinches to the breaking point.

The saddle-bags were there too. But they had been opened. A few hundred gold and silver coins were scattered on the ground along with the mail. The horse was gone.

The answer was apparent. Franklin and Dodds had trailed him, knowing that the cinches would break. Then, instead of killing him, they had made off with the major portion of the loot, but leaving him in damning possession of some money, the saddle-bags and all the mail.

They had believed his story that the rider only had been wounded. He was the fall guy—stuck high and dry without an alibi. He knew Franklin had thought of this. Why avenge your brother when the law would do it for you?

Only the law had done no such thing. Worth had seen to that. He had dragged himself in agony through the bushes, stopping only once to trap his broken leg in the elbow of the log. By driving his left leg against it and pulling, in dizzying pain, he had made part of the shattered bones touch each other.

Makeshift splints had done the rest. He had lived in a cave, alternately starving and freezing, crawling out in brief forays to hunt small game with his knife. He had always been expert at throwing it as a hobby, now—to live—he became excellent.

It was six months and the snows were on the ground before he had hit the trail on foot. At Junta he had stopped, taking the job at the livery. When he saw himself in a glass, he gasped in amazement. His face was drawn and haggard, his nose smashed and twisted and in some manner his crooked leg somehow had deformed his whole body.

He wasn't the wild kid, Worth, any longer. And, years later, when he had adopted Cozey, he had buried Worth forever, he hoped.

Worth had stayed buried until Dodds had ridden past. Then the nerve that had once marked the wild kid had returned. Knowing his days were limited now—for this time the remaining Franklin certainly would avenge his brother—he had set up the knife board. It was the last gesture he ever could make to assure Cozey that some day he could ride.

He turned from the window when a waddy rode into the stable. He stabled

the puncher's horse then began to first shear, then shave a month's growth of beard from the tanned face.

The waddy chattered with the aimless eloquence of a man temporarily released from lonesomeness. Preoccupied, Bert, didn't hear a word he said, simply grunting in occasional encouragement.

The door from the stable opened, and Bert's eyes had the look of gunsights in them again. Here they were—mean, gangling, dark eyed Joe Franklin, wearing a beard for disguise—and Dodds—more insolent with age than Bert had remembered him. They stood just inside the door, studying him.

"We next?" Dodds asked. Bert straightened in surprise. Was it possible that his appearance, his whole personality, had changed so much that they did not recognize him?

He drew a long breath, and gambled.

"You're next."

He noticed that their horses were at the long hitching rack parallel to the stable in position for fast flight from town. That was bad.

The waddy got out of the chair and Franklin seated himself on the barrel.

"Just clip the beard and hair," he said. "No shave."

"I ain't much on hair cutting," Bert said softly. He could feel the pulse pounding in his throat.

Dodds, seated on the windowsill, jerked his head up at the sound of the voice. Then he reached negligently for a Denver newspaper. Behind the paper Bert noticed the movement of Dodd's arms, and when the paper was lowered to his lap Bert knew there was a gun under it.

Under the covering flower sack, Franklin moved his arms—and Bert knew he was facing two guns.

"Do as well as yuh can," Franklin said. "I look and feel like a woolly dog—a mad woolly dog. Hah!"

Dodds was studying Bert covertly. "Like I told yuh, after seeing him on the street, I still ain't shore. What do yuh think."

"I'm goin' to get a hair cut anyway. Hah! We'll see."

Bert stilled the trembling of his hands. There was a holstered gun in the back

[*Turn page*]

SURPLUS SALE!

Liko

BINOCULARS

45 x 3.5

ONLY $6.98

BRAND NEW

IMMEDIATE DELIVERY

with COATED OPTICS and Interpupillary Adjustment

First Time in America! Now you can have a close-up of all events with these all-purpose heavy duty binoculars. Precision lenses. Coated optics, interpupillary adjustment and other features found only in high priced binoculars. Carrying case and shoulder straps included. SEND NO MONEY. 10 day no risk money back guarantee. Order today! Ideal gift!

VETERAN'S EMPORIUM, Dept. B-7

1148 W. Chicago Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Veteran's Emporium, Dept. B-7
1148 W. Chicago Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Send me.....Liko Binoculars. ....Send C.O.D. plus charges

.....I enclose $..... Send postpaid.

Name .....

Address .....

City..... State.....

Be sure to add 20% Fed. Tax ($1.40)

This Easy Way

TEACHES GUITAR

AT HOME IN ONLY 30 Days Or Money Back

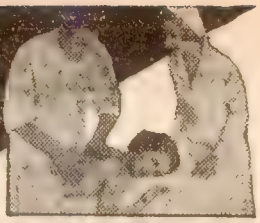
Astounding new Jim Major Home Method teaches you to play guitar easily, quickly, without long hours practicing scales or exercises. *No musical knowledge necessary.* Play many popular songs, hymns in very short time. Limited time offer: 30 lessons, complete course for only $1.69. Send no money . . . pay postman $1.69 plus postage. (Cash with order we pay postage.) Money back guarantee. Send today to Jim Major, Room 15-A, 230 East Ohio, Chicago 11, Ill.

HOW TO DO WONDERS ON AN ACRE!

MY WIFE and I would like to send you our FREE BOOK about our "HAVE-MORE" PLAN for "a little land—a lot of living." Tells how to do wonders with a garden, fruits, berries, poultry, livestock, etc.—all on small scale—in spare time. Many new devices, scientific methods. Special house plans and layouts for small acreages. It's a whole wonderful NEW SCIENCE of living—a healthier, happier, more independent life—on the little place you've always dreamed of having. Just drop us a post card today for our FREE BOOK—32 pages—50 illustrations.

ED ROBINSON • BOX 4901 • NOROTON, CONNECTICUT

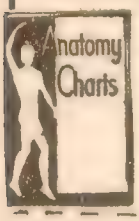
Learn this Profitable Profession



IN 90 DAYS AT HOME

MONEY-MAKING CAREER OPEN to MEN and WOMEN, 18 to 50

Hundreds of men and women between 18 and 60 make $10 to $20 in a single day giving Scientific Swedish Massage and Hydro-Therapy treatments. There is big demand from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums and clubs. Graduates earn large full time incomes from these or in private practice in their own offices. Others make good money from home treatments given in spare time. Learn this interesting, money-making profession in your own home, through our home study course. Same instructors as in our nationally known resident school. You can win independence and prepare for future security by qualifying for our Diploma. Course can be completed in 3 to 4 months. Many earn while they learn. Begin your training at once.



Anatomy Charts & Booklet FREE

Enroll now and we will include, at no extra cost, many needed supplies. Fit yourself to help meet growing demand for Scientific Swedish Massage. Send the coupon at once for complete details. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Booklet. FREE, postpaid.

THE COLLEGE OF SWEDISH MASSAGE
Dept. 863-A, 100 East Ohio St., Chicago 11, Illinois

Please send me FREE and postpaid, Anatomy Charts, 32-page Booklet and complete details on Home Training.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

Learn BAKING At Home

Baking is one of America's high industries in wages. Nearly depression-proof. Thorough basic home course lays sound foundation. If you have aptitude, write for FREE BOOKLET, "Opportunities in Commercial Baking."
National Baking School, 1315 Mich. Ave., Dept. 1801, Chicago 5

Fit-Rite makes False Teeth TIGHT

Makes loose dental plates fit snugly and comfortably.
LASTS for MONTHS!

Simply squeeze on dental plate and put it in your mouth. Hardens and becomes part of plate. Money-back guarantee.

FREE Generous package of Dental Plate Cleanser with each order. Send $1.00 or mailed parcel post collect.

Fit-Rite Co., 1573 Milwaukee Ave.
Dept. 1-82, Chicago, Ill.

If Ruptured Try This Out

Modern Protection Provides Great Comfort and Holding Security

Without Torturous Truss Wearing

An "eye-opening" revelation in sensible and comfortable reducible rupture protection may be yours for the asking, without cost or obligation. Simply send name and address to William S. Rice, Inc., Dept. I-L, Adams, N. Y., and full details of the new and different Rice Method will be sent you Free. Without hard flesh-gouging pads or tormenting pressure, here's a Support that has brought joy and comfort to thousands—by releasing them from Trusses with springs and straps that bind and cut. Designed to securely hold a rupture up and in where it belongs and yet give freedom of body and genuine comfort. For full information—write today!

room, but it might as well have been in the next territory. The long knife was at the far end of the shelf, out of reach.

SILENTLY, methodically, he began to cut Franklin's matted hair.

"Thought you were left-handed," Dodds said flatly. "'Pears like somebody told me that."

"Nope," Bert said. "My best hand don't do as good as it should."

"Ever hear of a man named Worth around these parts," Dodds prodded.

"Nope."

"Don't talk much, do yuh?"

"Nope."

"Hah!" Franklin boomed. "If more men was like you, there wouldn't be so many people gettin' hanged or shot to death."

Bert repressed a shiver. The door from the stable burst open and Cozey limped in, his eyes glowing with excitement.

"Gee, there's a man comin' with a whale of a bet—" he began.

"Remember that man in the gray suit?" Bert interrupted hurriedly. "Well, he forgot somethin' and if you'll go tell him I got it, he can have everything he's looking for. Hurry, before he gets out of town."

Cozey opened his mouth, frowned in puzzlement, then closed it with a snap.

"Why, he's comin' pretty soon. He's the one who told me to tell you he'd bet two hundred and fifty to a two-bit piece that you can't cut off the last number on the board by throwing the knife left-handed."

"Knife! Left-handed! Hah!"

Franklin's hands moved under the flour sack.

"It's him!" Dodds yelled. "It's Worth. He killed yore brother, Pete."

With his right hand Bert pulled on the backrest, spinning the barrel on its rim. Franklin clawed frantically at the air. With the same motion, Bert's left hand swept back and forward and a bottle of hair tonic made Dodds duck and shattered the window behind him.

Capitalizing on the propelling motion of the barrel, Bert lurched in a stumbling bent position for the end of the shelf. His left hand touched the knife as Dodds' gun boomed and the shock of

the bullet impact against his right shoulder made him pivot sharply.

His left arm was sweeping outward and Dodds' neck was in alignment. Bert's fingers moved a fraction of an inch as the knife sped from his left hand. It went through the back of Dodds' gun hand, knocking the weapon to the floor.

The barrel hit the floor and Franklin rolled. Bert went forward in a headlong dive. His left hand clamped on Franklin's right wrist, the hand holding the gun. His entire right side felt paralyzed.

"Run, Cozey," he gasped. "Run!"

Two shots blasted from the doorway, making splinters fly from the floor.

"That won't be necessary," the marshal roared. "Hands in the air—on yore feet—all of yuh."

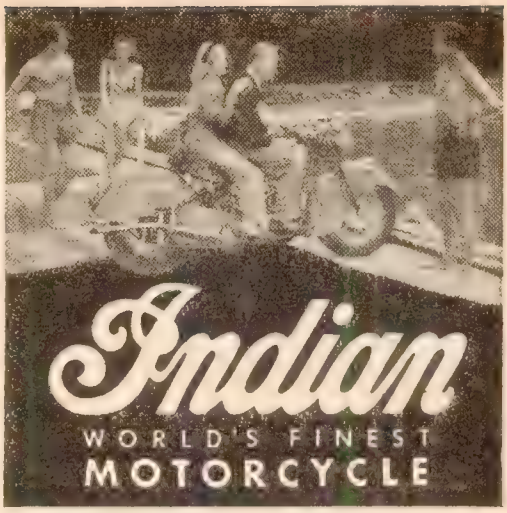
Joe Franklin cursed, dropped his gun and stood up. Dodds, his face twisted in agony, tried to raise his hand with the knife sticking through it, and couldn't. He cried in pain, fear and frustration.

[Turn page]

Get Aboard

THE FREEDOM TRAIN

Heading Your Way!



Indian

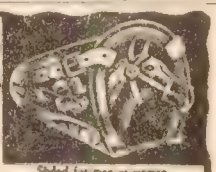
WORLD'S FINEST MOTORCYCLE

Send for FREE ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE, "Indian News"
• • • DEALER INQUIRIES INVITED • • •
Dept. 6G, Indian Motocycle Co., Springfield 9, Mass.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD!
TRAIN FOR A FUTURE IN
DIESEL

● Prepare for the big earning power of **Diesel Trained Men.** Start learning at home, in spare time. UEI's easy, practical training covers all phases of DIESEL engine operation, fuel systems, auxiliary equipment, repairs and maintenance. When home course is completed, you come to Chicago for actual shop practice on DIESEL MOTORS under expert instructors, at UEI's fine, modern school.
BEGIN AT ONCE—GET ALL THE FACTS FREE. WRITE TODAY!
DIESEL DIVISION UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
2521 Sheffield Ave., Dept. 1028-D, Chicago 14, Illinois

STERLING SILVER
LADY LUCK HORSE SHOE Ring



Statuesque Horse's head, horse shoe and 4-Leaf Clover design. Handsomely formed from solid Sterling Silver. Oxidized, hand-buffed finish.
Styled for men or women.
SEND NO MONEY! Just clip ad and mail with name, address and ring size. Pay postman only $3.98 (tax included) plus postage. Wear for 6 days. If not delighted, return for full refund.
Western Craftsmen Dept. 506A 1904 Farnam Omaha 2, Nebr.

GET EYE-GLASSES by MAIL
Send No Money!
16-DAY TRIAL Offer
NEWEST STYLES

NEW LOW PRICES
Send for FREE Scientific Sight Test Chart and Catalog. Write today.
U.S. EYE-GLASSES CO. 1557 MILWAUKEE AVENUE Dept. 1-82, CHICAGO 22, ILL.

LEARN AT HOME
TO BE A PRACTICAL NURSE
You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. Thousands of graduates.
HIGH SCHOOL NOT REQUIRED
49th year. One graduate has charge of 10-bed hospital. Another saved $400 while learning. Equipment included.
Men, women, 18 to 60. Easy tuition payments. Trial plan.
CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 4212, 100 East Ohio Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet and 16 sample lesson pages.
Name.....
City.....State.....Age.....

INTRODUCTORY OFFER

$1.98

All-in-one Cigarette Lighter and Full-Pack Case gives you cigarettes and lights together as you want them. Streamlined, smart, modern . . . a wonderful convenience, the ideal gift. FREE . . . ANY NAME ENGRAVED ON CASE IN 23-KARAT GOLD! For men or women. Built for lifetime service of beautiful plastic. Deep-well lighter holds amazingly large supply of fluid. **SEND NO MONEY . . . 7-DAY TRIAL.** Order on trial inspection and approval. On arrival deposit $1.98 plus C. O. D. Use 7 days. If not delighted return for refund. (Send $1.98 with order and we pay postage.) Be sure to send name to be engraved. (Engraving not available in Canada.)
H & S SALES, Dept. 15-A, 1101 N. Paulina, CHICAGO 22
Canadian address: 22 College St., Toronto, Canada

LEARN MEAT CUTTING
At Home—In Spare Time

Get into the vital meat industry. Concise, practical Home Training based on 25 years proven instruction method used at National's famous resident school. Prepares you for bigger pay as Meat Cutter, supervisor, market manager or more money in your own store. Go as rapidly as your spare time permits. Diploma. Start NOW to turn your spare hours into money. Send for FREE bulletin today. No obligation.
National School of Meat Cutting, Inc., Div. TG-27, Toledo 4, Ohio

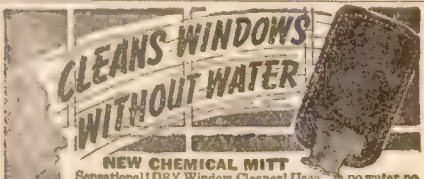
ASTHMA

WRITE FOR 10-DAY TRIAL OFFER!

IF YOU SUFFER FROM BRONCHIAL ASTHMA PAROXYSMS, from coughs, gasping wheezing — write quick for daring **10-DAY TRIAL OFFER.** Inquiries from so-called "hopeless" cases especially invited.
NACOR, 423-L, State Life Bldg., Indianapolis 4, Ind.

OLD LEG TROUBLE

Easy to use Viscose Home Method. Heals many old leg sores caused by leg congestion, varicose veins, swollen legs and injuries or no cost for trial if it fails to show results in 10 days. Describe your trouble and get a FREE BOOK.
T. G. VISCOSE COMPANY
140 N. Dearborn Street, Chicago 2, Illinois



NEW CHEMICAL MITT
Sensational! DRY Window Cleaner! Uses no water, no messy liquids. Chemically Treated. Simply glide over windows; leaves glass sparkling clear. No heating water, no heavy buckets to carry. No rags, powders, sponges, chamois. No mess or muss. No red chapped hands. Dust, dirt, grime disappear like magic. Wonderful for auto windows, windshields!

SAMPLES FOR AGENTS Simple offer sent immediately to all who send name at once. A penny postal will do. SEND NO MONEY—just your name. **KRISTEE CO., 1471 Bar St., AKRON, OHIO.**

Bert weaved to his feet and clung to the shelf for support.

"I've been lookin' for you boys for a long time," the marshal said grimly. "Little matter of murder and robbing the United States mail."

He walked over to Dodds, and with one quick motion jerked the knife from his hand. Dodds sagged back against the wall, white with pain.

Handcuffs clicked—once—twice. Bert waited for the third click. It didn't come.

"Hah!" Franklin roared. "Take the barber, too. He was in on that caper."

"He did the killin'—his name's Worth," Dodds moaned.

Through the curious crowd attracted by the shots, the local sheriff pushed his way. The marshal motioned to Bert.

"Who's this man, sheriff?"

The sheriff looked surprised. "Why that's Bert Benton. He runs this livery and is one of our best citizens."

"I thought so," the marshal said. "Will you take these two to jail sheriff, while I have a talk with Bert about this? I'll pick 'em up later."

The sheriff led crying Dodds and cursing Joe Franklin outside. . . .

Gripping his shoulder, Bert stared at the marshal, waiting.

"As I said before," the marshal exclaimed jovially, "queer things happen in bandit gangs, and some never get explained. Now that pair, mistakin' you for this Worth feller. Why the type of man this Worth was, wouldn't have set up such a board just to help a kid when he knew he was signin' his own death warrant. It took a man with a lot of courage to do that. I think you got a lot of courage, Bert, but I'm wondering just how much."

"How much?" Bert said, puzzled.

THE marshal bent and picked up the bloodied knife.

"I saw that pair come in here, and followed. And I deliberately sent Cozey inside to force a showdown. But I wasn't joking about that bet. One last throw—for you—cutting off number one thousand—and I'm sending Cozey to the hospital. Will you try it? Since yuh can't throw with yore wounded right hand, it'll have to be the left—and it's goin' to hurt like fury when yuh come

down on that bad leg of yores."

His voice was flat, challenging. It was asking the impossible, Bert knew that. He could beg off and not be criticized too much. That the marshal was going to take him away on some charge or other seemed certain. Hadn't he said—one last throw? But if he dodged the issue Cozey's chance of ever riding would be gone.

"Remember the knife," the marshal said, pressing it into Bert's hand, "for it's the last time you'll ever throw one."

Holding the knife in his left hand, Bert limped outside until he faced the areaway of the stalls. The marshal recalled that men going to the gallows dragged their feet in the same hesitant manner as Bert.

The board at the back of the stable was dim in the gloom, the pinpoint of its tail—carrying No. 1000—almost invisible. The crowd ringed behind Bert, silent, yet somehow acutely aware that something momentous was about to occur.

Bert stood with the knife bent back across his left shoulder. Then his hand lowered in uncertainty. The pain in his shoulder was dizzying, the pain in his heart almost intolerable.

"Throw, Bert, throw," the marshal prodded. Bert's hand wavered uncertainly for a moment, then came up and back. The knife sped with blinding speed past the stalls.

His groan as his weight came down on the crippled leg was audible. The tail of the board dropped to the floor and the knife quivered in the woodwork behind it. Bert expelled a long breath and started forward to get the knife. Cozey's hospital was assured. Someday he would ride.

[*Turn page*]

BUY CHRISTMAS SEALS

•

FIGHT TUBERCULOSIS!

•

AUTO BOOKS ON APPROVAL

SEND NO MONEY. Just mail the coupon for a complete set of 4 Big, Thick Auto Books. 20th Edition. 2800 Pages! Whether you are a mechanic or helper, expert or apprentice, auto owner or driver, take immediate advantage of this FREE EXAMINATION OFFER.

MAKE GOOD MONEY NOW HOLD A PERMANENT JOB

America wants its automobiles kept in good repair. Men with "know how" are in demand, at big pay. These books will help you get and hold an important job, or give you a chance to go into business for yourself now or later. Any man who half tries to improve himself can learn auto servicing and repairing by this quick reference method. Use the JIFFY INDEX to find easily understood answer to any auto problem. These wonder books prepared by eleven of America's great automobile engineers. Many hundreds of valuable illustrations. Send the coupon TODAY.

CAN YOU FIX IT?

These wonder books tell step by step HOW to make difficult repairs and adjustments, how to keep a car at maximum efficiency, including latest improvements in car design and operation. Engine troubles and how to correct them well covered.

4 BIG, THICK VOLUMES

2800 pages, 2000 illustrations, wiring diagrams, etc., including Diesel engines. Beautiful modernistic, washable cloth binding.

[**A year's consulting privileges with our engineers now given with these books without extra charge.**]

Vocational Publishers Since 1898

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY, Dept. A149
Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago 37, Ill.
I would like to examine your 4-Volume Set of Auto Books. I will pay the delivery charges only, but if I choose I may return them express collect. If after 10 days' use I prefer to keep them, I will send you $2 and pay the balance at the rate of only $3 a month until $24.80 has been paid. Include consulting service as offered above.

Name .....

Address .....

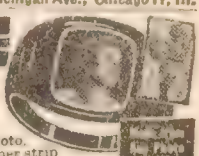
City ..... State .....

Please attach letter stating age, occupation, employer's name and address, and name and address of at least one business man as reference. Men in service, also please give home address.

LAW

STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 39 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. G.I. Approved. Send for FREE BOOK.
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 84-T, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

PICTURE RING $1.



Exquisite Picture Ring—made from any photo.
SEND NO MONEY! Mail photo with paper strip for ring size. Pay postman only $1 plus postage. Hand tinted 25c extra. Photo returned with ring. Money back guarantee.
SEND PHOTO AND RING SIZE NOW!
PICTURE RING CO. Dept. U-26, CINCINNATI 2, Ohio

SEND NO MONEY!

HELP KIDNEYS If Back ACHES

Do you suffer from Getting Up Nights, Backache, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Dizziness, Swollen Ankles, Rheumatic Pains, Bladder Weakness, Painful Passages, or feel old and rundown, due to non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles? If so, try Cystex.

This great medicine, a doctor's formula, has helped thousands of sufferers for over 20 years. Usually the very first dose of Cystex starts to work immediately to help you in these three ways: 1. Helps nature remove irritating excess acids, poisonous wastes and certain germs. 2. This cleansing action helps nature alleviate many pains, aches, soreness and stiffness. 3. Helps reduce frequent night and day calls, thus promoting better sleep.

Get Cystex from your druggist today. Give it a fair trial as directed on package. Money back guaranteed unless Cystex satisfies you.

Be an ARTIST!

—Train at Home in Your Spare Time

The fascinating field of Art offers commercial opportunities to men and women. COMMERCIAL ART, CARTOONING, DESIGNING all in one complete course. We prepare you step-by-step. Trained Artists are capable of earning $50, $60, $75 a week. TWO ART OUTFITS included with training. FREE BOOK, "Art for Pleasure and Profit—" describes course and method of instruction. STATE AGE.

Course approved under G. I. Bill

WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART, Studio 661 M
1115—15th St., N. W. WASHINGTON 5, D. C.

FREE BOOK gives details

Stop Getting Up Nights

TRY THIS FREE

If you get up many times at night due to Irritation of Bladder or Urinary Tract, and have never used PALMO TABLETS we want you to try them at our risk. We will send you a full-size package from which you are to use 20 tablets FREE. If not delighted at the palliative relief received, return the package and you owe us nothing. We mean it. Send No Money. No C.O.D. to pay. Write today and we will send your PALMO TABLETS by return mail post-paid. Address — H. D. POWERS CO., Dept. 129-M, Box 135, Battle Creek, Mich.

AIR RIFLES **BENJAMIN** AIR PISTOLS

PIONEERS - LEADERS

SEND FOR FREE FOLDER OF LATEST MODELS TODAY

If you want a REAL GUN for PRACTICAL USE inside or outdoors get a SAFE - CLEAN - ECONOMICAL - BENJAMIN with Adjustable Power and Amazing Accuracy. For BEST RESULTS use BENJAMIN H-C PELLETS. WRITE AT ONCE.

BENJAMIN AIR RIFLE CO., 876 MARION ST., ST. LOUIS 4, MO.

BE A DETECTIVE

WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write to GEO. R. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

STERLING SILVER

SADDLE RING

Authentic Western Design

Authentic miniature reproduction of romantic western saddle. Handsomely formed from solid Sterling Silver by expert silver craftsmen. Massive style for men! Dainty style for women and children!

SENT ON APPROVAL! clip this ad and mail with your name, address, ring size and style.

SEND NO MONEY! When ring arrives, pay $4.95 plus a few cents postage or send cash, check, or money order, and we pay postage. Wear this sensational ring for 5 days. If not delighted, return for full refund.

WESTERN CRAFTSMEN
Dept. 006K 3904 FARNAM ST. OMAHA 2, NEB.

"Leave it there, Bert," the marshal said. "Never touch it again."

"Why?"

"Well, let's say that I'm buying that knife, and I can do what I want with it."

The crowd muttered in puzzlement.

"I was looking for three hard men when I came up here, and I only found two. But it's been my pleasure to meet a man with a lot of courage."

He turned to Cozey. "When you go ridin,' how would you like to have Bert alongside? A leg like his can be re-broken and fixed."

"Gee!" Cozey exclaimed, "Hully gee!"

"That's foolish to raise up a kid's hopes—" Bert began.

"'Tain't foolish at all," said the marshal. "There was five thousand reward on those two hombres—and you caught them, didn't you?"

Bert's eyes suddenly were smarting. He couldn't say anything and he didn't try.

Read Our Companion Western Magazines

GIANT WESTERN
TRIPLE WESTERN
THRILLING RANCH STORIES
POPULAR WESTERN
WEST
RANGE RIDERS WESTERN
THRILLING WESTERN
MASKED RIDER WESTERN
TEXAS RANGERS
RODEO ROMANCES
THE RIO KID WESTERN

●

Now on Sale at All Stands!

TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 10)

doned mine in the district of your choice.

It might be that such a property could be picked up for back taxes through officials at the county seat. At least at the county seat you should be able to dig up the names of the owners of the property and their addresses. Often owners are local people. Sometimes the owners of record live far off.

In any event if the property seems suitable for your purpose you could then make an attempt to contact the owners directly. With a proper diplomatic approach you might be able to do business on a lease basis, if no other.

Another thing to bear in mind is that you don't need a going mine to draw visitors. In fact a stream of visitors in an operating mine would hamper the work of mining, and possibly be dangerous to the tourists themselves.

Enter Via Tunnel

If you cotton onto a mine that can be reached from a sidehill simply by walking into the main entrance tunnel you will be saved the headache and necessary know-how of both operating the cage necessary to take tourists down a mine shaft and of keeping the lift in a safe condition that will satisfy regular inspection by State mine authorities.

A hole in the ground from which metal ore has been or can be mined is what interests the tourists. The timid may even sheer off from a mine cage, where they wouldn't hesitate to walk into a tunnel. In any case make sure the passageways are free of loose or

[*Turn page*]

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

•

WHEN THE JOKER WENT WILD

An Uproarious Tombstone and Speedy Yarn

By

W. C. TUTTLE

Separate Chassis Like the Powerful Series 16 AM-FM Above, or Beautiful Radio-Phono Consoles Available

The SYMPHONY GRAND
RADIO-PHONOGRAPH
AM-FM CONSOLE

A truly magnificent instrument that offers new, improved No-Drift FM, 5 Wave Bands, Automatic Intermix Record Changer that handles both 10" and 12" records, 14½" Panasonic Speaker, and exclusive Midwest Tri-Magnadyne Coil System and Color-Ray Tone Selection. Luxurious Cabinets. Other Console and Table Models with Series 16, 12, and 8 Chassis.

EASY TERMS

30 DAYS TRIAL

SEND FOR FREE CATALOG

BUY DIRECT FROM FACTORY AND SAVE

FILL IN COUPON AND MAIL TODAY OR JUST SEND YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS ON 1c POSTCARD

MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION
Dept. 18-L, 909 Broadway, Cincinnati 2, Ohio
Please send me your new FREE 1948 Catalog.

NAME .....

STREET .....

CITY ..... ZONE .... STATE .....

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men. Caution: Use only as directed.

30 Years in Business

FREE BOOK

THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton, Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

HARMONICA
AND COMPLETE NEW COURSE OF INSTRUCTION
$1.49

Not a toy, but a real musical instrument you can learn to play in 15 minutes or no cost! Play waltzes, hymns, popular songs from Hoppy's complete course of instruction—easy to understand, lessons show you how, step by step, and include the music and words to over 200 songs. Get both HARMONICA and complete instructions and song book now for only $1.49. If 7-day trial doesn't thrill you—return for money back in full. SEND NO MONEY. Send name and address, receive HARMONICA plus instructions and song book at our risk. Pay postman $1.49 plus postage. Money back if you can't play in 7 days. (Cash with order, we pay postage.)

Write to:

HOPKINSON CORPORATION
Dept. 15A, 1101 N. Paulina St., Chicago 22, Ill.

What To Do For Pains of ARTHRITIS Try This Free

If you have never used "Rosse Tabs" for pains or arthritis, neuritis, rheumatism, we want you to try them at our risk. We will send you a full-size package from which you are to use 24 Tabs FREE. If not astonished at the palliative relief which you enjoy from your sufferings, return the package and you owe us nothing. We mean it! SEND NO MONEY. Just send name and address and we will rush your Tabs by return mail. ROSSE PRODUCTS CO., Dept. 134, 2708 Farwell Ave., Chicago 45, Illinois.

ASTHMA

Don't let coughing, sneezing, choking, recurring attacks of Bronchial Asthma ruin sleep and energy another day without trying Mendaco. This great internal medicine is tasteless and taken exactly as directed works thru the blood, thus reaching the bronchial tubes and lungs. Usually starts helping nature immediately to remove thick, sticky mucus, thus alleviating coughing and promoting freer breathing and more refreshing sleep. Get Mendaco from your druggist today. Money back guaranteed unless completely satisfied.

RUPTURE!

An amazing Air-Cushion Invention allows body freedom at work or play. Light, neat, cool, sanitary. Durable, cheap. Day and night protection helps Nature support weakened muscles gently but surely. No risk. **Sent on Trial!** Write NOW for free Booklet and **Proof of Results.** All correspondence confidential.

Brooks Company, 183 State St., Marshall, Mich.

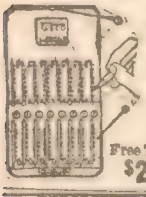
PANNING GOLD

LEARN HOW NOW

Send name for FREE Illustrated booklet-catalogue, How To Pan Gold and list of mining books and prospectors supplies. Price of gold expected to double soon.

The Old Prospector

Box 21B46 Dutch Flat, Calif.



ARITHMETIC MADE EASY

Amazing palm-size adding machine does all figuring. Adds, Subtracts, Aids in Multiplication & Division up to $99,999,999. All steel, guaranteed 5 years, fits pocket. Millions in use all over the world. We pay postage on prepaid orders or COD plus postage & charges. Money back if not satisfied. Leatherette case 25c add'l.

Free Trial $2.50

TAVELLA SALES CO. Dp 188
25 W. Broadway New York 7, N. Y.

FREE ENLARGEMENT of your Favorite Photo

FROM FAMOUS HOLLYWOOD FILM STUDIOS

Just to get acquainted we will make a beautiful 5 x 7 enlargement of any picture or negative. Be sure to include color of hair, eyes and clothing and get our bargain offer for having your enlargement beautifully hand colored in oil and mounted in your choice of handsome frames. Please enclose 10c and your original picture or negative will be returned with the free 5 x 7 enlargement postpaid. Act now! Limit 2 to a customer.

HOLLYWOOD FILM STUDIOS
7021 Santa Monica Blvd., Dept. 384, Hollywood, Calif.

projecting slabs of rock or of anything visitors might stumble over on the passageway floor.

My personal suggestion would be, don't make the trip too long. A few minutes underground will satisfy the curiosity of most non-miners merely eager to see what a real mine looks like. And always accompany your guests so that you will be on hand to answer questions (even the foolish ones) and make sure the visitors complete their inspection tour safely.

Another thing that should be remembered in connection with this unique method of tourist mining is not to make your charges too high. Fifty cents or a dollar ought to be plenty (with a free sample of ore thrown in) depending on the type of mine and trip you can offer. More satisfied customers at lower rates will build up your business a lot more solidly than a few at high prices who go away feeling they didn't get their money's worth out of the experience.

A last word and then it's time to sign off. You don't need to have an old gold mine. Even good gold ore is seldom spectacular in appearance. But a mine or prospect no matter how lean that carries some of the more colorful copper, lead, or zinc ores, or their combinations at least looks like a mine. And a colorful sample from such a property will look like ore, not just dirty old quartz rock.

S'all for the present. See you folks back again, next issue. And lots o' luck mining gold, or mining tourists!

—CAPTAIN RANGER

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

THOSE two ring-tailed rannihans, Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith, are at it again. You can't keep a good man down—and to keep two good men down is twice as hard. Tombstone and Speedy—which same if laid end to end would total some twelve feet seven inches, and crossways about the thickness of a braided lariat—are detectives for the Cattlemen's Association. And, as such, some hyena is always tryin' to lay them end to end, colder'n a steer's nose in a blizzard.

Nobody, so far, has succeeded—one reason being that Tombstone and Speedy look and act so much like yokels that their enemies never suspect them of being what they are—that is, a couple of plenty smart hombres.

Another reason is that when it comes to gettin' an iron out and blastin', they're quicker'n a boogered bobcat on a redhot stove.

But sometimes even Tombstone and Speedy scrape so close to the edge of disaster that the hair comes off in chunks. Their latest adventure is one of those times. It makes very fine reading, the way W. C. Tuttle tells about it, and you'll find it in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN under the title, WHEN THE JOKER WENT WILD.

Of course, these two cowland sleuths start out by being flat broke. That's a chronic condition with them, but sometimes it flares up and becomes painfully acute—as in this instance, in which the seven-foot Tombstone put their condition in a sentence. Asked if they were "short," Tombstone said:

"Did you ever measure the metatarsal bone of a flea? Well, that's only half as short as we are."

But when Jim Keaton—him who rods the C. A. and rules the destinies of this skinny pair—sent them on a mission to Smoke Tree City, Tombstone did some tall wriggling in anticipation. He seemed to have an uneasy memory of having been there before—and he had been. He hoped earnestly that the citizens of that torrid town had forgotten the couple of fellers who once dragged a proddy yearling into the Pasatiempo saloon, soaked the critter with rotgut and caused him to run amuck.

The yearling left the saloon, but that was about all he left. He took the batwings with him on his charging shoulders, and he had six men, and a lot of assorted tables, chairs, spittoons, and such, spaced at intervals along the rope he was dragging. One of the men was the sheriff, and another was the saloonkeeper.

[*Turn page*]

AUDELS Carpenters and Builders Guides 4 vols. $6

Inside Trade Information for Carpenters, Builders, Joiners, Building Mechanics and all Woodworkers. These Guides give you the short-cut instructions that you want—including new methods, ideas, solutions, plans, systems and money saving suggestions. An easy progressive course for the apprentice and student. A practical daily helper and Quick Reference for the master worker. Carpenters everywhere are using these Guides as a Helping Hand to Easier Work, Better Work and Better Pay. To get this assistance for yourself, simply fill in and mail the FREE COUPON below.

Inside Trade Information On:

How to use the steel square—How to file and set saws—How to build furniture—How to use a mitre box—How to use the chalk line—How to use rules and scales—How to make joints—Carpenters arithmetic—Solving mensuration problems—Estimating strength of timbers—How to set girders and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square—How to build hoists and scaffolds—skylights—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to hang doors—How to lath—lay floors—How to paint

AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

Mail Audels Carpenters and Builders Guides, 4 vols., on 7 days free trial. If OK I will remit $1 in 7 days and $1 monthly until $6 is paid. Otherwise I will return them. No obligation unless I am satisfied.

Name_____

Address_____

Occupation_____

Employed by_____ PAL

DETECTIVES

Home Study in Detective Training—Professionally Modernized—Recognized Instructors—Easy Payments—Write:
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE TRAINING SCHOOL
1701-T Monroe St., N. E. Washington 18, D. C.

STUN Your FRIENDS With GENUINE DIAMOND LIKE ZIRCONS

Sparkling, "Brilliant-White" zircon gems, all sizes, from far-off Siam; cut, polished, mounted just like diamonds. You will be amazed at their diamond-like appearance—it's hard for even experts to tell the difference. Exquisitely smart settings 14K yellow or white gold—over a hundred gorgeous latest-style rings to choose from. Top quality. Attractive low prices. Send for FREE CATALOG. U. S. ZIRCON SYNDICATE
139 N. Clark St. Dept. ZC-18 Chicago 2, Ill.

TRAVEL - for 'UNCLE SAM'

RAILWAY POSTAL CLERKS
$2,300 First year regular
MANY OTHER GOVERNMENT JOBS

Postoffice Clerks—Mail Carriers—Stenographers—Typists, Statistical Clerks, Storekeeper—Gaugers, etc. 32 Page Civil Service Book—FREE.
MEN — WOMEN
Veterans Get Preference
Mail Coupon immediately—today sure.

$1,756 to $3,021 FIRST YEAR

COUPON

FRANKLIN INST., Dept. P94, Rochester 4, N. Y.

Gentlemen: Rush to me, without charge, 32-page book with list of U. S. Government big paid positions. Advise me also regarding salaries, hours, work, vacation, etc. Tell me how to prepare for a position.

Name..... *Address*..... *Vet?*....

YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!

Help Bring Crooks to Justice Through Scientific

CRIME DETECTION!

We have taught thousands this exciting, profitable, pleasant profession. Let us teach you **in your own home.** Learn Finger Printing, Firearms Indentification, Police Photography, Secret Service Methods thoroughly, quickly, at small cost. Over 800 of all American Bureaus of Identification employ I. A. S. students or graduates. We can prepare you for this fascinating work, during spare time. Write today, **stating age,** for "Blue Book of Crime."

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE, 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7961, Chicago 40, Ill.

ANY BOOK IN PRINT

Delivered at your door. **We pay postage.** Standard authors, new books, popular editions, fiction, reference, medical, mechanical, children's books, etc. **Guaranteed savings.** Send for Clarkson's 1947 catalog.

FREE Write for our great illustrated book catalog. A short course in literature. The buying guide of 300,000 book lovers. The answer to your Christmas gift problem. **Free if you write now—today!**

CLARKSON PUBLISHING COMPANY
Dept. T-7, 1257 So. Wabash Ave., Chicago, Ill.

What Every Mason Wants

We have Important Masonic books for Blue Lodge, Chapter, Commandery, Scottish Rite, and Shrine.
OUR RITUALS ARE USED THE WORLD OVER
Send for free catalog of books and rituals for Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, Knights of Columbus, etc.
EZRA A. COOK, Publisher, P.O. 796, GA, Chicago 90, Ill.

How to Make Money with Simple Cartoons

A book everyone who likes to draw should have. It is free; no obligation. Simply address

G.I. BILL APPROVED

CARTOONISTS' EXCHANGE
Dept. 71 Pleasant Hill, Ohio

WHY WEAR DIAMONDS

When dazzling Zircons from the mines of far-away mystic East are so *effective* and *inexpensive!* Thrilling beauty, stand acid, true backs! Exquisite mountings. See before you buy. Write for **FREE** catalogue.

Address: National Jewelry Company Dept. 5-A Wheeling, W. Va.

Catalog FREE!

ENTERTAINING PUZZLES ON EVERY PAGE OF

POPULAR CROSSWORD PUZZLES

•

NOW ON SALE

ONLY 15c AT ALL NEWSSTANDS!

Read EXCITING WESTERN Every Issue!

But, brother, revenge was only part of what was waiting for Tombstone—and Speedy—when the two of them hit Smoke Tree City. A woman bandit was at large—and plenty large! Her voice, behind the mask, was soprano, but, ladies and gents, her six-guns sure sang bass!

Words and music! The words you'll find in the next issue of this magazine. Just look for Tuttle's fine yarn, WHEN THE JOKER WENT WILD!

You know Joe Archibald's stories. He has another one, a novelet, in the next issue. It bears the handle, A BARGAIN WITH SIXGUN LAW, and it's one of this author's best.

Evers Chance rode into town and into trouble at one and the same time. The town was Hardin. The trouble was that a hold-up had been committed there just a little while before, and Chance was in a mighty suspicious spot. His situation wasn't helped any by the fact that there were things in his past that wouldn't make him look so good if they came out. Total that up, and add a beautiful girl for good measure, and you have what it takes to make a good story. This is that kind of yarn.

And, in the same big issue, another novelet will draw and hold your attention. It's RANGERS RIDE WITH DEATH. Jackson Cole wrote it, and it's the story of Navajo Tom Raine, tall, talented Arizona Ranger, in an adventure that opens with action and continues that way clear through to the hair-stirring finale. Tom Raine is always a man to ride the river with, and Tom Raine in action makes the kind of reading that speeds the clock hands.

Chuck Martin's HELL ON HORSEBACK is a rousing short, and the issue has other stories, too, along with the departments. And, speaking of departments, we'll now head for the bunkhouse where all you rannies get together to talk about EXCITING WESTERN and its stories.

—CAPTAIN RANGER

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WRITING a letter is no trick at all, once you begin! It just goes right along. As when you're talking to someone about EXCITING WESTERN, you say what you like in it, and what you don't like, and if you'd just write it instead of talking it—there would be your letter! Or it can be a postcard if you choose. Anyway, don't let another sun set on your indecision. Grab the

writin' tools and get busy. Below are the communications of some who did.

I have just finished the July issue of EXCITING WESTERN, the first that I have read. I enjoyed it very much. All the stories were interesting. The two I liked best were "Plumb Satisfied" and "Coral City Showdown." I think W. C. Tuttle is a very good author. I will be looking for the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN.—*Arthur Hosmer, Jr., Whallonsburg, New York.*

Thanks, Arthur. We're glad to welcome you into the large and growing circle of our readers. They live here, there and everywhere, all over the world, but they have one interest in common—they love to read rousing yarns of the West of Frontier days!

Tombstone and Speedy are a pair of fine hombres, and they run into dangerous situations without hesitation. Also, they shoot fast and straight. But they have not so much to worry about when the slugs start flying as some of the rest of us that are a lot wider across the middle than those two put together. When somebody aims at us, he's got himself a target. Aimin' at one of those two skinny jaspers, it's either a bullseye or a clean miss. But that's all right with me. The longer they keep on living—and appearing in W. C. Tuttle's stories—the better I'll like it.—*Brad Stonebeck, Baltimore, Md.*

You've really got something there, Brad!

I feel that I must write you regarding your article about the raising of turkeys. The article is very good, except for one or two small points. You say that a six-foot fence will hold turkeys. I must contradict that. Turkeys from six weeks to four months of age are easily able to fly over a fence *ten* feet high, and they even roost on this same fence, if not stopped.—*Edward L. Field, Refugio, Texas.*

Mr. Field is the manager of the turkey division of the J. E. Bauer Ranch, and a partner in the business. We're sure you know your turkeys, Ed, and we do know that those birds are high-flyers and no mistake.

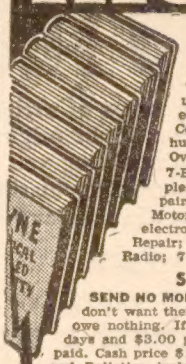
EXCITING WESTERN is the best of the Western books, in my opinion. I have read it since the first issue, and it seems to me to get better all the time. Navajo Tom Raine is one of my favorites. He seems so typical of the best of the Old West, and they certainly had some fine folks in those days, men and women both.—*Ken LaCrosse, Indianapolis, Ind.*

And that, Ken, is no exaggeration. They did have some fine folks in those old days. No other kind could have conquered the West. It took intelligence and courage!

Okay folks, I guess that's all for now. The next move is up to you—meaning, of course, to bring out the pen or pencil and put down on paper, for our eyes, what you liked, or didn't like, in this issue you've been reading. Please address all mail to The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Be seein' yuh, and thanks tuh everybody!

—THE EDITOR

EARN MORE MONEY IN ELECTRICITY



Get the better jobs at bigger pay as Electrical Industry expands. 200,000 more men needed every year. Be ready with the knowledge from Coyne's new "Applied Practical Electricity" in 7 volumes. Written and approved by electrical experts for easy, quick understanding. Complete up-to-date, fully illustrated with hundreds of diagrams, circuits, other helps. Over 5,000 subjects.

7-Book Set includes: 1. Elementary Principles and Circuits, Household Appliance Repairs; 2. Wiring for Light & Power; 3. D.C. Motors & Controls; 4. A.C. Motors & Controls, electronics; 5. Armature & Stator Winding & Repair; 6. Refrigeration & Air Conditioning, Radio; 7. Automotive Diesel Battery.

Sent on 7-Day FREE TRIAL

SEND NO MONEY. Ask to see them at our risk. If you don't want them after 7 days, send them back and you owe nothing. If you keep the set, send $3.00 after 7 days and $3.00 per month until $21.00 plus postage is paid. Cash price $19.75. 1 year Free Consultation Service and Bulletins included. Extra! Book of 150 Shop Prints absolutely FREE if you act promptly. Send your name and address on post card for 7-DAY FREE Examination and FREE book. Act now!

B. W. COOKE, Pres., 500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 97-75, Chicago 12, Ill.

Watch the Smoke Curl

Kentucky Tavern BARBECUE ASH TRAY

ALSO AN INCENSE BURNER! It's different! It's beautiful! It's useful . . . attractive for home and office. Handcolored to look like the real firestones. Smoke curls out the chimney. Holds generous supply of cigarettes and matches. Has metal fireplace grill cover which lifts out to remove ashes. Ideal gift. $1.98—includes a package of incense.

$1.98

SEND NO MONEY!

Rush this COUPON

ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART

Dept. 1475-A, 1227 LOYOLA AVENUE, CHICAGO 26, ILL.

( ) Rush Barbecue Ash Tray C.O.D. for $1.98 on money back guarantee.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

LAW

STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 39 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. G.I. Approved. Send for FREE BOOK.

AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW

Dept. 84-T, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

TOOTHACHE? DUE TO CAVITY

GET QUICK AMAZING RELIEF by placing Dent's Tooth Gum—or Drops—in cavity of aching tooth. Cavity toothache frequently strikes when you can't see dentist. Be prepared! Ask your druggist for either complete aid package. Follow directions.

25¢

DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS

Free for Asthma

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing. Caution! Use only as directed. Address

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO.

978-A FRONTIER BLDG.

462 NIAGARA STREET BUFFALO 1, N. Y.

WHICH OF THESE *EXCITING* BOOKS DO YOU WANT?

Now you can enjoy many hours of exciting reading pleasure at a small fraction of the original cost. The Popular Library reprints bring you word-for-word, page-for-page books of proved popularity in durable reprints. Take your choice of the titles listed below.

ONLY 25¢ EACH

- **EVERY ONE A FULL-SIZED VOLUME!**
- **EVERY ONE A FAMOUS BEST SELLER!**
- **EVERY ONE ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AT $2 OR MORE PER COPY!**

POPULAR LIBRARY *Mysteries*

- 113 CRUCIBLE *by Ben Ames Williams*
- 111 BEDELIA *by Vera Caspary*
- 87 FATAL DESCENT *by John Rhode & Carter Dickson*
- 63 SING A SONG OF HOMICIDE *by James R. Langham*
- 65 THE WOMAN IN THE PICTURE *by John August*
- 67 MURDER ON THE YACHT *by Rufus King*
- 69 THE LISTENING HOUSE *by Mabel Seeley*
- 98 DIVIDED ON DEATH *by Brett Halliday*
- 97 A VARIETY OF WEAPONS *by Rufus King*

POPULAR LIBRARY *Westerns*

- 119 FIREBRAND *by Tom Gill*
- 103 THE PHANTOM CANOE *by William Byron Mowery*
- 114 RAMROD *by Luke Short*
- 104 MESQUITE JENKINS, TUMBLEWEED *by C. E. Mulford*
- 118 THE FLYING U'S LAST STAND *by B. M. Bower*
- 96 SINGING RIVER *by W. C. Tuttle*
- 95 THE RED LAW *by Jackson Gregory*

POPULAR LIBRARY *Specials*

- 102 DUEL IN THE SUN *by Niven Busch*
- 110 CONGO SONG *by Stuart Cloete*
- 94 THE MORTAL STORM *by Phyllis Bottome*
- 115 POPULAR BOOK OF CARTOONS
- 107 CROSSWORD PUZZLES
- 91 THE SEA-HAWK *by Rafael Sabatini*
- 101 LUMMOX *by Fannie Hurst*

ORDER BY NUMBER
MAIL COUPON TODAY!

POPULAR LIBRARY, INC., Dept. TFG-1
10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y.

Send me postpaid the Popular Library books I have circled. I enclose 25c (in coin or in U. S. stamps of small denominations) per copy (NOTE: We pay postage on orders for 4 books or more. If ordering less than 4 books, please enclose 5c per book extra for postage.)

87	95	98	103	63	111	115	91
96	101	104	65	113	118	94	97
108	107	110	114	119	67	69	

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY & ZONE..... STATE.....

KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

AMENHOTEP IV
Founder of Egypt's
Mystery Schools

This Sealed Book—FREE

Has life brought you that personal satisfaction, the sense of achievement and happiness that you desire? If not, it is your duty to yourself to learn about this rational method of applying natural laws for the mastery of life. To the thoughtful person it is obvious that everyone cannot be entrusted with an intimate knowledge of the mysteries of life, for everyone is not capable of properly using it. But if you are one of those possessed of a true desire to forge ahead and wish to make use of the subtle influences of life, the Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) will send you A Sealed Book of explanation without obligation. This Sealed Book tells how you, in the privacy of your own home, without interference with your personal affairs or manner of living, may receive these secret teachings. Not weird or strange practices, but a rational application of the basic laws of life. Use the coupon, and obtain your complimentary copy.

Use this coupon for **FREE** *copy of book*

SCRIBE T. V S.
The Rosicrucians (AMORC)
San Jose, California

Please send free copy of Sealed Book, which I shall read as directed.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____

The ROSICRUCIANS
SAN JOSE (AMORC) CALIFORNIA

for every writer's every written word!

SENTINEL DeLuxe THREESOME

The only complete writing ensemble—everything you'll ever need for *whatever, wherever, however* you write!

Sheaffer's celebrated *"TRIUMPH"* pen for character writing—for putting *you* on paper! The dependable ball-tipped STRATOWRITER for quick notes and casual writing—for making carbons, for signing stencils, for addressing packages, for permanent red, blue or green writing on almost any surface.

And Sheaffer's famous FINELINE pencil for all erasable writing—for figuring, sketching, jotting memoranda.

Three separate and distinct writing instruments—but only *one* quality, *top* quality, *Sheaffer's* quality!

SENTINEL DE LUXE THREESOME—*"TRIUMPH"* PEN with 14-K gold point, $15; STRATOWRITER, $10· Pencil, $5; complete set, $30. No Federal Tax.

SHEAFFER'S

Copyright 1947, W. A. Sheaffer Pen Co.

Listen Sunday to SHEAFFER'S PARADE with Eddy Howard—*NBC Network*: 3 P.M. E.S.T.; 2 P.M. C.T.; 1 P.M. M.T.; 12 Noon P.T.
Listen Saturday to SHEAFFER'S ADVENTURERS CLUB—*CBS Network*: 11:30 A.M. E.S.T.; 10:30 A.M. C.T.; 9:30 A.M. M.T.; 8:30 A.M. P.T.